

arden 2016











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# arden

volume XVIII

2016

*ARDEN 2016 STAFF*

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Cover art: *Body Part 2* by Victoria Dugger

Inside covers: *A Monument to What Came Before &  
Study for Window to Past Memories* by Julianna Wells

## **CARSON McCULLERS LITERARY AWARDS WINNERS**

### **Naartjie Multimedia Award for Expository Writing**

*First Lady of the World* by Tara Van Kleef from Echols County High School  
*Addressing Contemporary Effemiphobia in Tony Kushner's Angels in America* by Jessica Shehane from Columbus State University

### **The Brick Road Greear Prize for Poetry**

*First Encounter with a Skeleton* by Zelma Mae Cable from Armuchee High School  
*Anne, and Why She Left Me* by MCraig Barker from Columbus State University

### **The Orlene Jones Poulsen Award for Fiction**

*Vapid Purple* by Jacob Del Toro from Tift County High School  
*Blackberry Picking* by Alyssa Hudson from Columbus State University

### **The Paul Hackett Award for Creative Nonfiction**

*Tired* by Jacob Del Toro from Tift County High School  
*One Does Not Simply Love* by Tonya Streeter from Columbus State University

Chapter 10: The American Revolution

Section 1: The Road to Revolution

The American Revolution was a war for independence from British rule. It began in 1775 and ended in 1783. The war was fought between the thirteen American colonies and the Kingdom of Great Britain.

Section 2: The Causes of the Revolution

There were several causes for the American Revolution. One major cause was the issue of taxation without representation. The British government imposed taxes on the colonies without allowing them to elect representatives to Congress.

Section 3: The Declaration of Independence

The Declaration of Independence was adopted on July 4, 1776. It declared that the thirteen colonies were no longer part of the British Empire and that they were now free and independent states.

Section 4: The War Begins

The war began in 1775 with the Battle of Lexington and Concord. The British army was sent to seize weapons from the colonial militia. The militia fired the first shot, and the British retreated. This battle marked the beginning of the American Revolution.



## KOCIAN WINNERS 2016

### Poetry

Expletive Phrase: The One We Taught Each Other by Leah Vahjen

### Fiction

It's Normal at This Age by Tom Ingram

### Creative Nonfiction

Hands Scratch the Empty Sky by Justin Briley

### Art

Alstroemeria by Julianna Wells

## EDITOR'S NOTE

In my previous years at this university, the *Arden's* presence has seemed to me a sort of phenomenon, or perhaps a system of phenomena. The mechanics remained steadily veiled and served as a point of fascination-yet the journal was always peripherally present, reemerging each year in a sort of graceful recursion, solemnly suspended through the halls like notes in adagio. So admittedly, when offered the opportunity to oversee the journal, my excitement to unveil and synthesize the process was in part obscured by sheer nervousness. There's an immense pressure involving the desire to both elegantly display and extend the tradition of *Arden* while effectively (and proportionately) conveying the artistic climate of your peers. The impression is that of being at the helm of something bent and incongruous, at the forefront of an accelerating mass of frenetics, ideas and efforts. There's a spirited mass of limbs, punting out in jagged directions and lapping excitedly, which of you are given the task of taming to Croisé. The work is brimming its own lambent vitality, in perpetual strain for an accordant release, often reminding you through gritted teeth. Papin's equations apply.

But what my initial anxieties failed to recognize is that this mass is as committed as it is benevolent. The only phenomenon that I discovered is that the elegance of the journal is not matter of something being constructed or imposed, but rather one of arcane self-sufficiency. Over the last few months, I've been a spectator to the graceful arc of the proceedings, and the realization that I've subsequently come to is that the work will always sustain and constitute itself through the artistic resilience of its contributors.

I want to thank everyone who contributed in any way, however grand or infinitesimal. Your kind words and ideas, tireless stream of dedication, and particularly your friendly faces, have all been reassuring and invaluable.

And thus, WFA, godspeed, onward, et al.-

Cody Bishop  
*Editor in Chief*

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In the full knowledge of his mission, the author has written this book in a spirit of humility and respect for the many who have contributed to the field and effort as a part of his journey. He is aware that while he has written this book, many others have been writing theirs, and he is sure that the book will be read by many who are not yet aware of its existence. He is also aware that the book is not a final word on the subject, but rather a starting point for further exploration. He is grateful to the many who have helped him in his journey, and he is sure that the book will be a useful resource for many who are interested in the field.

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I want to thank everyone who has helped me in my journey, and I am sure that the book will be a useful resource for many who are interested in the field.

And the LORD God said, "Let there be light."



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(Reflection reflection)

Then I realize 20 was only nine years ago. Only. One keystroke, one syllable makes the leap from that asshole to me because, sometimes, the distance traveled in time doesn't have a one-to-one relationship with the gap between versions of self. That's the scariest reality. And because it's only one keystroke from that asshole to me, I realize how much less stands between me and every other asshole that's ever sat behind my eyes and driven this shambling, softening flesh of mine through the world in the intervening eight, six, three, years since.

So I have to ask: who's this asshole?

And while it's nothing whatsoever profound to acknowledge the manifold times you were an asshole, disassociating each version of yourself at your worst down to the most tenuous double helix connection and understanding that you are, in fact, trapped inside the same cantaloupe-space as all the rest of these you's renders attractive the notion of a separable, discreet soul. Silly and sinful as that seems.

But that's a pipe dream. We are the sum of who we were and only divisible by the factor of aging modified by a factor of experience.

We're instinctually aware of this, even as we try to reason our way out of it. We're all Cartesians, asking for an a priori escape route. We know this in our bowels. We pass it into the atmosphere, and blame someone else. That's why we still execute murderers, even after they done found Jesus. They're skullmates with murderers.

Look in a mirror sometime. Doesn't matter how old you are, just do it. Now remember something you did once that cost you a friend. Remember when you lost yourself inside your head, acted like a character on the CW, like a Kardashian cartoon or a Michael Cera simulator. Remember the look in their eyes—the horror, the cringe, the fuck-off-now-okay.

That you is still this you, and you are inseparable from yourself. Your parents are still the kids they were before you. They have no idea what they're doing. You won't either.

When you realize how little aging changes anything, you look back on yourself and cringe, and look forward to yourself and apologize. "Sorry I fucked it up for you, bro. I'm sure you'd be awesome, if it weren't for me (:"

There's only one thing to do: Look around, find someone better than you. You're the judge. Be honest. Find someone who's an awkward clay model of who you'd like to be. Watch them. Hunt their heart, mimic their motives, and go home.

Open a Word file. Parse them out, mold them into a character. Fight the blinking, black curser until you've created life. Give them flaws, like all good fiction. But they overcome their flaws, like all heroes (but they have to pay for it!).

Save the document under "P0rN" so no one opens it and uncovers your secret. The next and natural step...

Pretend to be that person, and make all past versions of yourself the supporting cast.

The comic relief and the villain. The wild-eyed love interest. The dead mentor. The best friend.

This is the secret to becoming someone new. This is the secret to becoming the best you.



I grew up being told never to stop on the road for strangers. Although we may not always heed our parents' warnings, this warning I abided by, for I always remember my parents telling me this. We have also been told to make smart decisions, that our choices are important, and that we should listen to our parents. These instructions have been supplemented with terrible stories about women getting kidnapped and people's cars being hijacked as they stop to offer help to a seemingly vulnerable person, so we grow up to assume the worst and make the choice to keep going. Once, I was faced with the decision to stop or keep driving, and my decision changed my view of how the world operated.

It was 2 A.M. and cold. Luckily, the heater in my '05 Chrysler Sebring was one of the few functioning parts in the deteriorating car. While I sang along carelessly to "Invisible Touch" by Genesis, I drove inattentively, concentrated more on the crunch of my pretzel bites than the road. Remembering that dark morning: the heater breathed warmth onto my face while I sang to no one and my gym clothes hung loosely on my body. The night was clear; there was nothing I anticipated, nothing I expected except the dark and deserted road I was driving home on, River Road. The road began on one end of Columbus, where lights and other cars shared the asphalt, but the black snake eventually slithered its way into Harris County, vacant of travelers save my inattentive self, in the winding way dark and deserted roads do. As I drove around a curve, a bit faster than I should have, I zoomed past a figure standing in the road. I slammed on my brakes; my tires squealed a nasty response. My pretzel bites flew from my lap and landed somewhere in the floorboard. I am unsure how I managed to stop so fast, nor am I positive about how I missed the figure in the road; nevertheless, I accomplished it.

My achievement was short-lived, however, for soon after I stopped, I heard an unwelcome thump from behind me. A man had appeared and fallen against the trunk of my car. I could see the struggling silhouette staggering its way up the side of my car toward my drive's window. Surprised and defensive, I rolled my window down just enough to talk to the man leaning against my door. I felt the cold winter seep its way into my warm car and touch my skin. I turned down "Take On Me," which had replaced Genesis on my CD player. "Hey man, are you ok?" I inquired through the tiny space I had cautiously made just for talking to this unidentifiable man. Only my window stood protecting me from potential danger as what my parents had warned me of repeated in my mind like a broken record. He let out a breath that turned into a dense cloud in the cold air, but made no sound. Then, he stepped away from my car, but fell against it again. Could this man be tricking me? Is he going to kidnap me? Take my car? Hurt me? I did not know who he was, yet I opened my door and stepped out into the darkness.

There weren't any street lights; we were where there were only trees and the dim

light of a waning crescent moon. I picked up my phone from the ash-coated dash of my Chrysler and turned the weak flashlight on, pointed it up toward the man's face, and immediately knew he was not going to do me any harm. I noticed that his hair would have once been a large puff of black that sat lightly on top of his head, and hid his ears. But now, blood traced his hairline and glued chunks of his black hair together in uncomfortable wads. It trickled down his face and stained his once white shirt. It ran from his ears down the dark skin of his neck. It shined in the faint light of my cellphone flashlight. I was taken aback. I had never seen anyone so battered and bleeding with no one else around. I told him he should get out of the road, sit on the edge of the nearby ditch, and I would be right back. I hustled to my car to pull off the road and turned my emergency lights on before I hurried back over to the man I still did not know.

In spite of my instruction, he was still wandering in the shadows the trees cast on the road from the pale moonlight when I arrived back at his side; I had to direct him off the road myself. Although it was dim, my eyes had adjusted so I could see him slightly better. I could now see his eyes squinting out of their swollen and blackened sockets. I could also see the underside of a car, perhaps a Toyota, in one of the deep ditches that lined River Road for miles. The car's taillights pointed toward the sky, blinking in the night. It looked as if the pine trees we were surrounded by had attempted to catch the poor Toyota that lost course. The car was tightly wedged between the strong pine trunks and the soft, wet dirt of the muddy ditch. I wondered how the man managed to climb out of the car, up the steep ditch, and back up onto the road. It was too dark and I knew people drove too fast down River Road at 2 A.M. to be walking around aimlessly with your senses knocked into a ditch with your car. I asked him if he was alright and what happened. Obviously he was not alright, but he sputtered, "I've been workin', you know, so much, you know. I just, I just fell asleep." He reached his hand toward his face and held it as if his head weighed fifty pounds. Through his hand, he asked to use my phone because his was in his wrecked car. I informed him that I was going to call 911 and that he needed to sit down. Quickly punching the required numbers on my iPhone, I looked around for any landmark that we could be found by. Unfortunately, the man wrecked into those pine trees because that was the only thing around to hit. Before I could find a distinguishable landmark, I heard a pleasant female voice chime through my phone speaker, "Hello, 911. How may I help you?" She was too pleasant to be a 911 operator. "I need an ambulance. I was driving down River Road and I saw a guy who wrecked and he's hurt really badly," I replied. She asked where on River Road we were, and I tried to explain to her that I was driving toward Harris County from Double Churches Road, but she did not understand. My thoughts were racing: how could you not understand? Every-



one knows how to get to Harris County on River Road! Yet, in the rush to see if the man was alright and to call 911 before he fell unconscious in the road, I failed to realize that there were, in fact, many ways into Harris County from Columbus, and I was being frustrating.

However, the frustration was mutual. I was becoming worried and impatient, for I was trying to help but had nothing to say. I hurried up the road in an attempt to find a landmark I could use as I kept repeating, "There is nothing, I'm sorry!" to her repeated reply "Ma'am, I need to know where you are at." She called for help on line 3, and soon after there was a different voice on my phone growing with frustration. I felt the creeping fingers of winter morning air crawling across my skin, penetrating my clothes, and digging into my bones. The cold air stung my face, arms, and legs; my light gym clothes were fine in the warm car, but they were not made to be running down a dark road in the cold. Suddenly, I saw faint lights glimmering over the hill I was running up. I discerned the familiar lights and exclaimed, "Creekrise! Just go toward Creekrise!" The 911 operator said only "O.K." and hung up in response, probably out of her frustration, but I knew someone was on the way.

My frustration quickly ceded and was replaced with relief. As I breathed heavily, my lungs fighting the now freezing air, I began to run back to make sure the man was still where I had put him on the side of the road. At first, I had not realized exactly how far I had ran, because when I turned around to run back, there was only darkness. My worry grew greater about the man I had stopped for and I ran faster. It was extremely difficult to breathe in the bitter air while running, but I was motivated. Of course, he was not still where I had put him on the side of the road, but the road was as barren as when I first zoomed past the man's limping figure. He was still wandering, but he was talking on a phone now. I was not sure who he was talking to, nor how he had gotten his phone from the car in the ditch, nor if it had even been in his car when he told me it was; nevertheless, he was stammering incomprehensible words into the speaker until he dropped the phone. Headlights appeared over my left shoulder and slowed, pulling off the road and turning on emergency lights just as I had. Once again, my parent's message played in my head: Do not stop for strangers. An older couple stepped out of the very large Ford truck now parked behind my car and rushed to the man I, once again, was trying to get out of the road. The older gentleman turned around to me and asked what happened. I recounted the events, pointed to the overturned car in the ditch, and said I had called 911. Fortunately, his wife was a nurse and knew exactly what to do while we waited for help to arrive. Somehow, she got the unknown man to finally sit down.

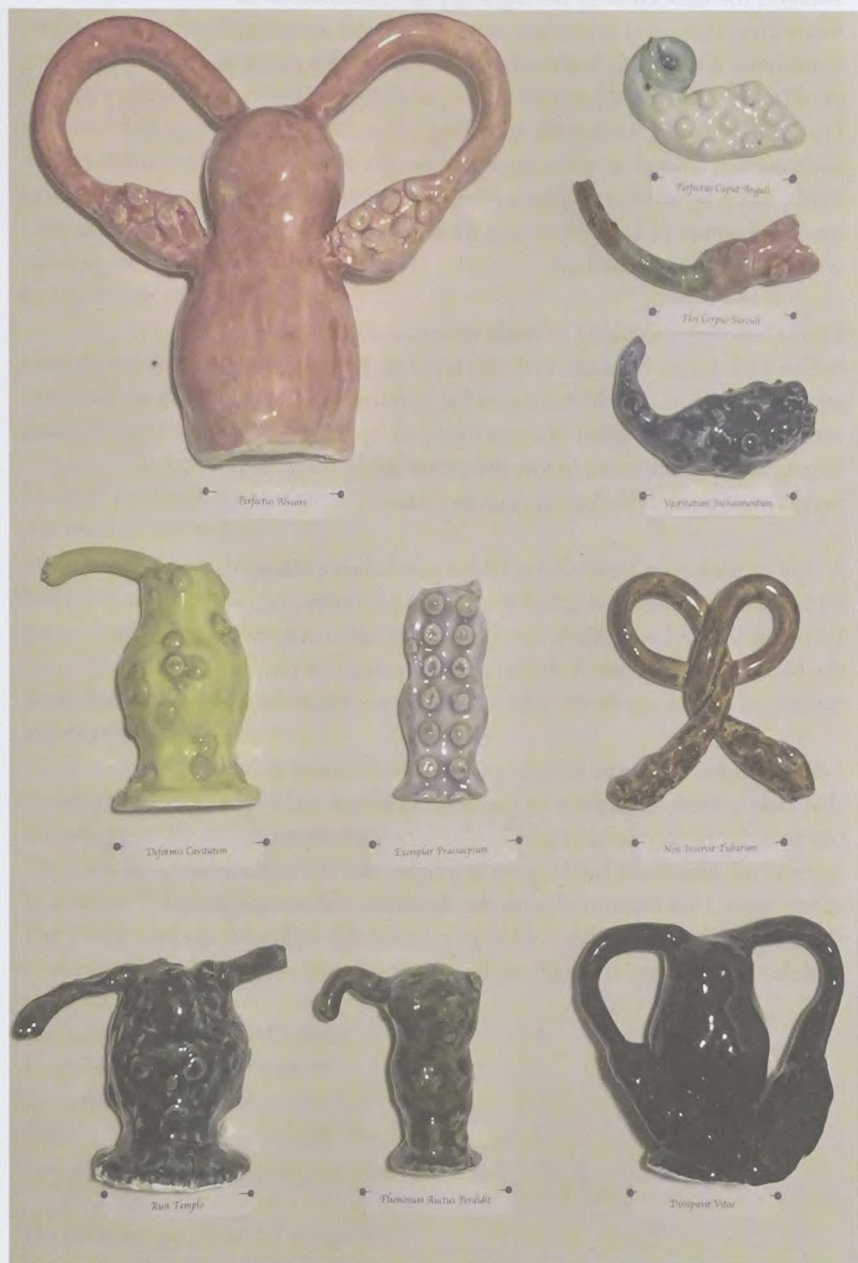
Soon after, we saw the flashing lights of a fire truck driving from the opposite side

the Ford came from. Firefighters, at least eight, began to file out of the truck and half swiftly attended the hurt man, half went to examine the car with its taillights still staring into the clear night sky. The older gentleman from the Ford turned to me and said, "Well, they've got this, you did good," gathered his wife, and quickly left. While still out of the way, I stood motionless in the dark, holding my arms to try to warm myself up. A fireman walked past. "Is he going to be alright?" I shivered. The fireman grunted a response and I knew that I must have interrupted a card game or something. I slowly walked back to my car, turned off my emergency lights, and drove home in silence.

By the time I arrived home, it was 3 AM. Thoughts flooded my mind. The startling events that unfolded the past hour would be remembered by one person: me. The firemen would not remember me, the older couple would not remember me, and the bloody man who I persistently tried to guide off the road would not remember me. I was bombarded with thoughts such as, "What if the next person down the road did not see the figure wandering around in the dark," "what if I had kept going," "would he have gotten hit," "would he have fallen unconscious in the road and gotten killed?" These thoughts prodded at my mind while I lay in bed, all the while my parent's message I had grown up with floating in and out of these thoughts. I wanted to tell someone what had happened, but it was past 3:00 in the morning and no one was awake to talk to. Then, I realized that the story did not matter. I may or may not have been the only chance for that hurt man to live, to make it home, perhaps even to whom he was talking on his phone, and he would not even remember the face who saved him. He did not know my name; I did not know his. Faces are hard to recognize in the darkness, and even more difficult to recognize covered in blood, so that even if we were to walk by each other in a mall or at school, we would be blind to the effect we had on one another's lives.

Stories such as these take place all the time, even on River Road, yet nobody remembers them. It does not matter that nobody will remember that I may have saved a man's life; that I decided to ignore my parent's warning that night. I will never expect a blue ribbon or a golden trophy to mark my decisions made, for only my memory will be the reminder. Although there was a human life, which we value dearly in our society, that may have fizzled out in the darkness, alone, on a dark and deserted road slithering into Harris County, the world kept turning, whether he was saved or not. Our choices can impact someone so powerfully it can change their lives, perhaps even save them, and no one would know.





## ARDEN XVIII

*Re:LIVING* BY LEAH VAHJEN

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Tonight, the molecules of the night sky are constructed of memories whose quick contact with my neurons leaves me wondering if their touch provoked in my mind this zoetrope of old men with hair thickened by wisps of cigar smoke I can smell now, seasoning the steaming, glistening crinkle cut fries that landed on my tongue one by one at baseball fields, lit up by towering lights so bright a boundary of night made a shoebox of Unity Park and its men, whose only love was Real American Baseball.

I must have been thinking of raffle tickets and sunflower seeds before I exchanged breaths with the tepid night air of the drug store parking lot. The flickering of the window-front sign must be reminding me of the glint of coins dropped by children buying sweets at the snack stand below my perch where I can hear myself announce, Now batting number nine.

A wad of pink gum beneath my white-soled shoe pulls up with the same resistance it had during hot summers, years before at Indian Ledge Park, the fields in Middletown, under the bleachers where small children found ecstasy in the endless rattling of grown-up shoes, which could never know they lurked below.

I do not know if it is the brevity of life or the finality of death that causes living organisms to continue to create and begin again; but tonight, in this derelict parking lot where mosquitoes borrow my blood and bubblegum highlights the zig-zags of my soles, I am enamored with the darkness, the carcinogens, the hunger, the magic I can find hiding within the milliseconds of delay between my sense of smell and my sense of self.

The kingdom of mosquitos and fireflies  
swells with sorrowful groans, his strings  
greeting each ear caring to listen.  
The bow glides over strings like breath  
over slumbering cuddled-bodies.  
Strings hum, content, the brooding  
cellist grows numb in syncopation.  
Dissonant chords cascade across  
Alaskan-snow skin yearning  
to touch one who refuses him.

I rap on his door to draw him out,  
drenched in sweat, he pulls me  
inside to spy their lovemaking.  
The cello moans as his boy never did.

I lounge on a mahogany chair,  
it screeches as I sit back.  
Since band-aids curl fingers  
buffering callouses,  
gauze must wrap his heart.

Sand dune bangs fall, obscuring  
artic eyes from the score.

Continuing from rote, lids descend,  
he imagines my seat filled by another,  
the boy gnawing on his insecurity.  
The musician winces, his solo fails  
to crescendo louder than self-loathing.  
For loving his boy, the cellist thinks  
God hates him as he does strings  
snapped on a sour note.  
His bloodshot eyes blink open,  
I expect his gaze to rest on me,  
intruding on this instrumental affair.  
Instead he looks, transfixed by the stern  
savior's corpus, on the hanging crucifix.

He turns to me, time for a cigarette,  
I have seen the light within him,



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one this cellist confuses with a pit.  
He exhales smoke wishing  
any thoughts of Him would billow  
away with the gray mist.  
I walk over to my porch burdened,  
after listening to him play.

CAVITY IV BY VICTORIA DUGGER



## ARDEN XVIII

*INVASIVE SPECIES BY ALYSSA HUDSON*

Honeysuckles bounce in the valley  
of my skirt, pinched at the hem  
with both hands. I look back  
at my grandmother's house,  
a fortress rising out of red clay,  
from the fence where the flowers  
choke dusty, wild ivy. Seated  
on her cinderblock steps, I suck  
nectar out, squeezing the flutes  
between my fingers, an organic  
sweetness textured by pollen.

Down the hill, uncle cuts crusts  
off baloney sandwiches for his kids,  
watching the hill from the screened  
window of his dented mobile home  
and waits. When grandmother  
goes, he guts the big house,  
slithers inside with his children  
and his dogs. After he cuts her  
tongues of honeysuckle, there are no  
more girls with flower-heavy skirts,  
pollen clung to their fingers.



Did you ever spend time in a boxing gym? the old man asked. When I was coming up, he continued, it was normal to box. The old man signaled the bartender for another bourbon and ginger ale.

One kid I won't forget, he said. He was the most baby-faced kid I ever saw. Maybe he was fourteen-years-old. Real sweet-looking kid, too, except that he was already about six-foot tall and must have weighed two hundred pounds. Can't imagine how his poor momma kept him in clothes and food.

The old coach in the boxing gym, a real dead-eyed son-of-a-bitch, used to send the new kinds into the ring first thing. A trial by fire, the old coach would say, and have some poor terrified boy don gloves for the first time in his life, and with their hands suddenly weighed down, match them up against another boy who really knew what he was doing.

Anyway, so the coach, the old man went on, matched the new big boy against a little guy, a kid about your size. Except that this little guy could fight. I mean fight. I boxed him lots of times. He was fast, man, and landed his hooks like Lightning Joe was behind them. Scary little guy. Can't remember his name.

So the sweet boy got in the ring with the little guy. The little guy let the sweet boy work some; you know, move around, throw a few slow crosses. After about a minute of the sweet boy trying to land something on the little guy, the old coach got impatient. He yelled something at the little guy, I can't remember what, but I could see the change come over the little guy. He drew in his elbows and dropped his chin. His eyes changed. Then he moved in on that big sweet boy. Didn't last long after that.

The old man ordered another bourbon and ginger.

What happened to the sweet boy? I asked the old man.

I don't remember, he said, but I think the little guy went on to compete for Golden Gloves. I don't know. That was a long time ago, and I don't care much for boxing anymore.

## ARDEN XVIII

*CAVITY II* BY VICTORIA DUGGER





"This is a pawn transaction. Failure to make your payments as described in this document can result in the loss of the pawned item. The pawnbroker can sell or keep the item if you have not made all payments by the specified maturity date."

*Down there at the pawnshop it's only way to shop*

*Down there at the pawnshop if it's not in stone.*

*Down there at the pawnshop at no end, no way to shop*

(1) All pawn transactions shall be for 30-day periods but may be extended or continued for additional 30-day periods.

(2) During the first 90 days of any pawn transaction or extension or continuation of the pawn transaction, a pawnbroker may charge for each 30 day period interest and pawnshop charges which together equal no more than 25 percent of the principal amount advanced, with a minimum charge of up to \$ 10.00 per 30-day period.

(3) On any pawn transaction which is continued or extended beyond 90 days, a pawnbroker may charge for each 30-day period interest and pawnshop charges which together equal no more than 12.5 percent of the principal amount advanced, with a minimum charge of up to \$ 5.00 per 30-day period. In the event the pledger or seller has lost or destroyed the original pawn ticket, a pawnbroker may, at the time of redemption, charge a fee equal to not more than \$ 2.00.

There are laws protecting the consumer from the pawnbroker charging too much interest, but there are no laws making the broker give the consumer a fair price for their merchandise.

We pulled into the pawnshop parking lot as the visibly angry man was walking out. Lucky for us we parked next to the disgruntled man. As we tried to ignore his outbursts and walk into the store he addressed us directly.

"I wouldn't go in there if I were you," he said.

"Why's that?" I could not help myself, but was interested in what looked like a guitar case in his hand.

"Those assholes in there are crooks," he told us.

"Probably so," I told him "But then again they wouldn't be in this business if they weren't would they?"

"Damn straight, I was trying to sell them my guitar, but they only wanted to give me \$50.00 for it," the man said.

"What are you trying to sell?" I asked him. He opened his case and showed us a white Fender Stratocaster that looked like it had never been played. My friend and I looked at each other. "How much are you trying to get for it?"

"I wanted \$300, but they didn't even come close to that."

"I'd buy it from you, but I only have \$260 on me." My friend spoke up.

"Sold," the man said and closed the case. My friend paid the man, and we got back into the car. We left the pawnshop without ever going inside.

*So, why I'm down here at the pawnshop.*

*Down here at the pawnshop, down here at the pawnshop, down here at the pawnshop.*

*What has been sold, not strictly made of stone.*

*Just remember that it's flesh and bone*

The customer scratched the back of his head as his nervously looked around the store, waiting for the guy that handles electronics. As the man approached, the customer slammed a hard shell guitar case that had seen better days on the counter.

"I want to sell my guitar," he told the man and opened the case revealing a beautiful Taylor acoustic guitar.

After testing the guitar and looking up the model online the man came back and said: "I'll give you \$200 for it."

The customer looked at the man the looked nervously outside again and said: "Man, I got bills to pay. I bought this guitar brand new for \$1,000, and it still looks new. I gotta get 6 out of it."

Clearly unimpressed, the man said: "Yeah, but this guitar is not in its original case. Those Taylor cases are really nice. So are Taylor guitars. When you come in here and throw a one down on the counter in this beat up case with stickers all over it, it kills the presentation. Nobody wants to buy a Taylor in beat up case."

I looked at my friend and rolled my eyes. I thought there was no way this guy was going to fall for that line. You can buy a brand new Taylor gig bag for \$65; they are not unique for each guitar. They are nice, but nothing special.

To my surprise, the man took the deal. After he collected his money, he was pulling the beat up guitar case of the counter and turning to walk out.

"Where are you going with the case?" the man asked.

"I'm taking it home," the customer said.

"No, I bought the case too," the man told him.

"I thought you didn't want it."

"I bought the guitar, and I bought the case with it."

The customer laid the case on the counter and walked out of the pawnshop looking defeated. A few times throughout the conversation I wanted to break in and tell the guy to go to a regular guitar store where they would not rip him off, but I didn't. The main reason for that was because the guy looked too sketchy. He kept looking around the store and outside the door, he seemed nervous.

I thought he had either stolen the guitar or owed somebody money. Either way, I was not going to get involved with any of it.

The next time my friend was in the pawnshop without me he said that somebody bought the Taylor guitar for \$600.



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Every pawnbroker shall maintain a permanent record book in which shall be entered in legible English at the time of each loan, purchase, or sale:

- (1) The date of the transaction;
- (2) The name of the person conducting the transaction;
- (3) The name, age, and address of the customer; a description of the general appearance of the customer; and the distinctive number from the customer's driver's license or other similar identification card;
- (4) An identification and description of the pledged or purchased goods, including, if reasonably available, the serial, model, or other number, and all identifying marks inscribed thereon;
- (5) The number of the receipt or pawn ticket;
- (6) The price paid or the amount loaned;
- (7) If payment is made by check, the number of the check issued for the purchase price or loan;
- (8) The maturity date of the transaction; and
- (9) The signature of the customer.

The woman stepped into the pawnshop with an air of dignity. She tightened the faux fur coat around her waist and straightened the matching brimless hat on her head. Her walk to the counter was slow and deliberate. The woman behind the desk recognized her and addressed her by name.

"Hello Mrs. Hazel," the clerk said with a smile too big to be real. Hazel stood up straighter and approached the counter.

"Yes, hello, I am here to make my payment." The woman in the coat looked down her nose at everybody in the store as if she thought she was better than the clientele who would associate with a place like this. The clerk went to a filing cabinet that undoubtedly arrived at the store under the same circumstances as Hazel's property. Upon pulling the ticket from the manila folder, the clerk asked Hazel the same question she asked the previous months.

"Will you be making a payment or paying in full?" Hazel sheepishly looked around the store before gathering her courage and saying

"I'll be paying 50 dollars. The same as always" she added as an afterthought. The sad smile from the clerk told the casual observer that this was a monthly ritual with Mrs. Hazel. "Ed gave me that ring 42 years ago you know? He has been gone three years next month. He would be appalled at how little you people gave me for that ring. It's not even a quarter of how much the ring is worth."

"We always strive to give the best prices in town, and we are working with you by allowing you to take the loan month to month, and you are almost paid in full." The clerk said. "You could always try another place next time you need to pawn the ring."

Mrs. Hazel signed her receipt and said: "Ha, I have gone to the other places before, and the are bigger crooks than you are." She turned on her heels and stormed out the door.

The woman behind the desk said: "See you next month," to the closing door and then, with the same fake smile from earlier, asked if I needed any help.

While Hazel was making the payment on her ring, I was searching for a cheap guitar so I could strip it down and create a better one. I came across a Squier Affinity Series Stratocaster that had promise. It was black with a few scratches and missing the volume knob, but as I said it was going to be stripped down, so these were trivial issues that may only help in making the price cheaper. These guitars are relatively cheap when they are brand new, but I had seen this one in here on many previous trips with a crazy price tag. The price they have wanted for the guitar for months has always been \$129.99. The pawn broker probably looked up the guitar online and saw the original price on this particular model was \$179.99 and thought a fifty dollar discount was justifiable, but after looking at the serial number I could tell this was a '03 model making it \$129.99 brand new and these guitars do not rise in value they depreciate like a car. This time, though they had cut the price all the way to \$40.00, needless to say, the guitar went home with me.

While this came off as a win in my favor, it made me think about the person who had pawned the guitar in the first place. No matter how much the guitar had been discounted the pawnshop would still need to make a profit, which means they paid less than \$40.00 to a customer for an item they were originally trying to make over 225% profit on.

*Down here at the pawnshop it's a nifty way to shop.*

*Down here at the pawnshop it's another sold.*

*Down here at the pawnshop what has been sold.*

*Not strictly made of stone, just remember that it's flesh and bone.*

My friend and I went to a pawnshop in Grantville we affectionately call "Methopolis." This place looks trashy with car and lawnmower parts all over the outside area spilling into the parking lot. When you walk in, there is a film that automatically adheres to you. I would never buy anything from the drink machines that line the wall or the candy at the register. This is the stereotypical horror movie pawnshop that is dirty and has merchandise lining the shelves as well as the floors and makes you wonder if you should get a tetanus shot if you make it out alive. The only reason we go to this place is that it actually has decent prices on guitars that we can turn into projects. They always have multiple models for \$60 or less, but you have to look for some of them like an Easter egg with a prize inside of it.

While walking/maneuvering around the store I came across what looked to be an old Fender tube amp head. After removing the red, greased stained toolbox and the



pile of (just) used wrenches from the top, I realized I had possibly found a diamond in the ruff. It was a Fender PA100 head from 1971. I sent my friend to guide his way to the owner to find out a price while I looked over my find.

"He's going to want \$400 at least for this thing," I told him as he hopped the first pile of chains on the floor. It looked as if it had been forgotten in a heap beside three stacks of tires in the middle of the store. When the owner waded his way over, I asked him how much he wanted for it.

"Umm...I'll take \$150 for it," He said as he squinted his eyes through grim-filmed glasses like he knew what he was talking about.

I hid my excitement while trying to act as if I was contemplating the decision I had already made. My friend could not hide his and kept saying: "You're getting it aren't you? Right? 'Cause if you're not..."

I cut him off before he could finish. I had dibs because I saw it first, but in this case, I found it first because I almost tripped over it.

As we walked out my friend was shaking his head, "Deal of the day, hell, deal of the year," He said as we loaded up.

Had my friend bought the amp he would have cleaned it up and sold it. The amp can be found selling between \$400 and \$500. However, this amp produces an exceptionally clean vintage tube sound, which is what I have been looking for. It will be cleaned up and kept in my personal collection. It will also remind me of a time when I actually reversed the process on the pawnshop, and I could make the 200% or more profit.



## ARDEN XVIII

*PUTTING DOWN THE DOG BY JUSTIN BRILEY*

Breathe in. Breathe out. Squeeze the trigger. That's how you shoot a rifle. Don't hold your breath, don't pull the trigger. Breathe in, breathe out, squeeze.

I breathe in. The old dog keeps turning his head, black mask over dingy blonde. He stares right up the scope. He can't see me, but he can feel me. Feel that thin cross pinned to his shoulder, the .308 caliber death hanging loose on a nail of air.

"Breathe out, then shoot." Granddaddy growls, his drawl pours honey over gravel.

I exhale. From my tippy toes.

There are few things in the world as simultaneously sensitive and blood-thirsty as a 12-year-old boy. I want to do this, and do it right. As anxious as I am savage. But the dog keeps eyeing me. Maybe he can smell the sweat on my palms.

"I don't want to." My voice cracks.

I hear the chk-chk-chk of a Bic, smell the cloying fumes of a GPC cigarette. Granddaddy suppresses a cough, smoke settling on his chest. Cancer, but we don't know that yet. "You oughta," he says. "That's the one got in the chicken pen. Seen him do it."

I sit pat a breath too long.

"Give me the fuckin' gun." He swore casually. Granddaddy was hard, but not cruel. Kicking the bottle wrung cruelty from his bones before I was born.

I cling to the gun when he reaches for it. (Grown now, I remember when he crushed a red brick in those calloused fingers. Years upon years of turning wrenches and hoeing fields left him with hands like knotted roots, and twice as strong. He could've taken it. His exasperation was calculated.) I cling to the gun, determined to be a man. He turns it loose, determined to make me one.

"Aight. Shit or get off the pot, son." His cigarette is half ash and he hasn't taken it from his mouth once. Just coughs around it. What you don't know, and so on.

Australia was settled by *Homo sapiens* approximately 40,000 years ago. Japan, 35,000. The first Africans to settle Europe pitched camp and started exterminating (and/or fucking into oblivion) the Neanderthals about 45,000 years ago. The Americas? 13,000 years ago. The ancestors of modern Amerindians didn't cross the Bering Strait until right before some ancient Iraqi noticed the apple tree growing out of the shit-trench and invented civilization. Why? What kept primal pre-Americans from crossing that intercontinental filament until so late in the expansion game?

Two things: dogs and hyenas. A binary relationship for the prehistoric age.

Dogs had been around for a while by this point. It's not clear what they did, exactly; but we know they at least existed as far back as 25,000 years ago. By 13,000 years ago,

though, they were largely dogs as we think of them. Wolfier, probably. But friendly, loyal, brave, etc.

And very good hunters. Wondrous.

Now these hyenas were not the Lion King variety. These "cave hyenas" were massive, up to 250lbs, and contrary to popular belief, hyenas can and do kill their own food. In prehistoric Siberia, their food was me and you.

But moving forward through the soil layers, higher and higher, an inverted relationship becomes apparent. Dog and human bones gradually become more common—hyena bones drop off at roughly the same rate. By 13,000 years ago, no more cave hyenas. A couple thousand years more, no more mammoths. No saber tooth cats, no wooly rhinos.

Before they humped couches or fit in purses, they enabled an extinction event. I breathe in.

I press my eye to the scope again. Too tight. Can't rest your eye on the rim like that, I've been told a thousand times. But I'm too busy to bother. I fix the mutt back inside his cage of steel and glass, hang the wicked cross loose over his body. I pin it over his left shoulder, looking for a heart-shot.

I breathe out.

Ever heard of yella dogs? Carolina dogs? The Dixie dingo? Fascinating animals. They're snake hunters. Copperheads, cottonmouths, rattlesnakes, anything. They'll eat it. No one knows exactly when or where they showed up. For centuries, white settlers just thought they were mutts. Trapped them, shot them, poisoned them, so on. But they're still around.

When they root up a snake, they do a funny little dance. The snake takes the lead, coiling, hissing, rattling, whatever. The dog follows. The snake makes her move, strikes, coils, and strikes again. The dog, she copies the snake. She strikes a sinuous pose, arches her neck back, pulls up her forelegs, and recoils away. But not far. She waits.

The angry snake eventually over-extends. When she does, the dog bites it behind the head, and that's just that. From paradise-killer to puppy chow in two minutes, tops.

These dogs do this without the slightest interference from or regard for humans. This is just what they do.

I pulled the trigger.

What about reservation dogs, ever heard of them? If you know anything about reservations, you've probably got a good idea. Maybe something like this:

"He snuffles through the ditch along the great, black river-that-does-not-flow. Hungry. Like the rest. Two turns of the moon have passed since he and his brothers and sisters killed the sheep. Two sisters were shot by a two-legs-brother who shouted. Three brothers died from the brown-water-shits-that-do-not-stop. The sheep was bad medicine.



A two-legs-sister in a paleface car surprised him one turn of the moon past. She gave him clean water, cleaner than any two-legs ever gave him before, and many small morsels that were dry but delicious.

But she betrayed him. She bound his muzzle in black, she put him in the paleface car, she took him to the bright house filled with palefaces. She did...things. She kept him there for several sunrises, among many brothers and sisters he did not know. They were as angry as he, and he joined their protest chorus.

The two-legs-sister heard his song, and she set him free in the wide-land-between-farms where there are no sheep. No two-legs trash. No dead things for him to steal. He cannot catch gophers. They are not stupid like sheep who do not run or two-legs who throw away food and shit where they sleep. This is not a world for him. And his favorite licking place has not tasted the same since."

Some bullshit like that.

You're probably right, too. There's a weird metaphorical relationship between rez dogs and their human cohabitants. Given the worst swatches of land, the shittiest water, and then ignored, they learn to survive through whatever's readily available. Very often, necessity trumps nicety. This metaphor becomes explicit among some tribespeople, but some resent it. It's complicated, having to do with different metaphysical traditions among different nations—plus the whole dog thing. Dog metaphors seem to be strangely global. I don't pretend to understand it all.

Anyway. Now Google "Native American Indian dog." I'll wait.

Somebody buys those majestic ass animals at \$2000 a pup. Somehow (and I'm really not clear on this) those, again, majestic ass animals are supposed to be authentic Native American Indian dogs. Nevermind the name. I know it's dumb.

I readily admit my ignorance, but I have a suspicion that those folks aren't getting the AUTHENTIC Native American Indian dog™ experience they're paying for.

You can't make the truth pretty, and you can't buy it.

I saw stars, heard a thousand tinkling bells, smelt the tang of gunsmoke on the hot July air, tasted iron and salt between my teeth. No one ever, before or since, hit me harder than that .308. Had a black eye for a month.

Granddaddy died in the winter of 2010. I had the misfortune to see him in the moments after. I'd visited earlier, felt the incredible strength lingering in his share-cropper's hands, and left to smoke a bowl.

When I got back, his hide was yellow and his eyes were shadowed beneath his brow. The cancer veining his lungs wasn't what did it. Oh, it was still there, and I'm sure it didn't help. But it was his heart that quit, hemmed in by water on all sides.

They buried him beneath a cross and a Bible verse. I found that inept at best. He'd have laughed. But then he would've said, "Death ain't for the dead, boy. It's for the dying."

The Oaxaca believe that a dog carries the soul over a river to the land of the dead. There's an old English belief that Ol' Scratch his-own-self takes the form of a black dog and wanders the moors, waiting for wayward wanderers to whisk away to Hell. Kerberos, a three-headed cur, guards the harrowing gates of Hades.

What about dogs inclined so many disparate peoples to associate them with death and darkness? Why are they the gatekeepers for our grave? Is it comforting to think the last thing you'll see before your spirit fucks off for good is man's best friend? Do we see our own fear and longing behind their begging eyes? What if you're a cat person?

This whole thing, writing this, prompted me to make a pilgrimage to his gravesite today. Took a while to find the headstone. It had a water stain spreading down from the top, over the cross. Like a dog had pissed on it in passing.

I smoked a cigarette with Granddaddy, and we listened to the sound of winter. When it was all burnt up, I snuffed it out on the stain.

Last week, I got a new dog. My wife finally talked me into it. He's a bulldog-Labrador mix named Solo, and he's glommed onto me like ugly on a catfish. His hide is yellow. Solo is an auspicious name for a dog. Conjures images of high adventure and mechanical ingenuity in the face of an overwhelming force with very poor aim. (Personally, I think Stormtroopers were guilty of not breathing out. Fucks everything up. Breathe in. Breathe out. Squeeze the trigger. Shit's easy, y'all.)

But this Solo is snoring on the couch, and he can't close his mouth without showing at least one snaggly tooth. He's okay, I guess.

For what it's worth, I missed him.



## ARDEN XVIII

*EXPLETIVE PHRASE: THE ONE WE TAUGHT ONE ANOTHER BY LEAH VAHJEN*

As you extend that fleshy, fricative "F," I know what comes next.  
I want to extend my fingers, grab the skin from below your nose to your chin,  
and hold your lips to the palm of my hand where I once felt  
the unbearably false slickness of my nylon basketball uniform  
as I grasped it tightly at my hips, two fists attempting to gather anything just after  
the Foley girl and her cohorts tell me a joke so sad I finally realize I am the joke.  
Instead, I am here: young again, reliving all my private  
catastrophes as if I am thumbing through the crisp cards of my rolodex  
looking for the exact place to sort your entry.

I am being kicked in the stomach by a playmate turned competitor for my  
mother's attention

Or, I'm sitting on a snowbank and I've just had my sweaty palm torn from the  
clasp of the only blue-eyed

boy I loved because I am moving and it turns out that balloon string handcuffs  
are ineffectual in the face

of adults with scissors

Or, I have been gone for mere months and Lauren has abandoned me even though  
I loved her when she

showed up in my second grade class with a brown tooth and a plain, Mid-  
western dialect

Or, on a final day of the school year, I am walking into the gym where my broth-  
er's girlfriend is echoing a

spectacle of her disaffection for me and everyone is laughing, even my brother

Or, every other plod of my chunky skate shoes against the grubby tile floor of the  
hallway is punctuated by

the word "dyke" as my stunning girlfriend and I hold hands on the way to class  
and I want to whisk her

pixie frame from the floor and let her dark, endless hair billow behind us,  
engulfing and enshrouding

the school until we are safe, but we will never be safe, or

My mother thrusts forth her argument with a single sally; she wails, "your father  
doesn't love

you," and he doesn't dispute the claim.

Somewhere between the "F" and the "U," I have entered

Robert Penn Warren's no-Time and I have found

that he is right—this is truly where we die.

I have died so many times now, I find it hard to believe

that at one point I will die without watching it happen.

You finish the phrase. The quiet beats. I give nothing. Your overgrown,  
European eyebrows, once charming, begin to jump they're not sure where.

## ARDEN XVIII

*THE IMAGE CATCHER TO THE PAINTER BY ALYSSA HUDSON*

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Flatness disappoints. Noses are robbed  
of smells: turpentine and raw linseed oil,  
noxious fumes rising to greet the nostrils.

Eyes cry for evidence of artist's hands:  
hog hair bristles embedded in toxic colors,  
tiny fingerprint crater landscapes, cracks

where you grew hasty, forgot the lesson,  
fat over lean. Even graphite grooves  
and scratches sheets of flat white paper.

Your smears of paint impress as much  
as the monochrome composition captured  
by shuddering parts inside my machine,

imprints on film, images constructed  
with hands—mine—that guided subjects  
into their places. Depth created by contrast

of light and dark captured on glossy papers.  
My workroom's smells: chemical, metallic,  
caustic in darkness. Like yours.

Flatness disappointing. My work is nothing  
until it emerges from the cloud of fumes,  
a caught vision, still whole.



MEDUSA BY ERIN BOZONE



2/4

"Medusa"

Erin Bozone

## ARDEN XVIII

*ALSTROEMERIA* BY JULIANNA WELLS









## ARDEN XVIII

*IT'S NORMAL AT THIS AGE BY TOM INGRAM*

It wasn't the first time Anne had called Dave at work and asked him to help with Ayden. Dave enjoyed these errands--the seasonal lunches, dropping off a forgotten backpack, even the doctor visit last October when Ayden had bronchitis. But on an early April Friday, with a sizeable list of client's taxes left to file, the last thing Dave wanted to do was tell his boss that he had to leave early. Dave explained this to Anne.

"That's why I'm saying put him in front of the TV all day," Anne said. "I hate it, but what else can I do?"

"When will you be home?" Dave asked.

"I'll call Sunday," Anne said. "If you pick out clothes tonight for tomorrow, then while he's getting dressed in the morning you can make him some breakfast. Snacks, a PB&J for lunch--the rest of the time you can work."

Dave planted an elbow on his desk and leaned his head into his hand. His landline rang.

"Just watch Ayden," Anne said. "It isn't hard. I'll call in a couple of days."

"Alright," Dave said. "Love you."

"Kiss Ayden for me," Anne said, and hung up the phone.

At St. Matthew's kindergarten, the receptionist directed Dave toward a long corridor that led to the playground. Moving down the hallway, Dave walked between photos of smiling nuclear families laminated onto rectangles of bright construction paper, which were suspended by paperclips from particolored yarn. Dave opened one side of the heavy double doors; the sound of squealing children crescendoed into full voice. A teacher greeted Dave on the playground. Dave recognized Mrs. Thomas as the young woman who had pounded out Christmas carol chords on the piano during the winter program. He apologized for arriving late.

"We add aftercare to the bill," she said, "and Ayden likes the extra time with his friends."

Dave and Mrs. Thomas were the only adults on the playground. He returned her smile and rocked in his loafers.

"We love having Ayden," she said, and then waved to Ayden. "He's on the slide."

Ayden, at the top of the slide, turned and looked at Mrs. Thomas. He looked at Dave. He turned his back to them and pushed himself over the precipice. When he planted his sneakered feet on the woodchips, he stood and walked to the slide's ladder, where another boy waited.

"I'll get his bag from the classroom," Mrs. Thomas said, and left through the double doors.

Dave heard one of the children shriek. He thought it might be one of the girls, but it's hard to tell at that age, when their voices are so nearly the same timbre. A group of children huddled around the slide, shifting weight and pulling shirttails. In the middle stood Ayden, looking down at something. Dave walked toward the cluster, juking a girl in braids who hadn't noticed the commotion.

"Ayden, what the hell," Dave said, entering the circle. A child from behind him offered

a sanctimonious, "ooh."

Dave took Ayden by the shoulders and squatted to eye-level with him.

"What happened?" Dave asked.

"Nothing," Ayden said.

A boy on the ground sobbed quietly, his hands over his left eye. Another child said, "Ayden hit Jamie."

"Why did you hit him?" Dave asked.

"I didn't do nothing," Ayden said.

The other children, bored with the scene, tottered off toward monkey bars and swing sets. Dave took Ayden by the hand, led him off the playground and through the double doors.

Dave and Ayden stopped outside Ayden's classroom to collect the backpack. Mrs. Thomas wished Ayden a good weekend.

"There was a thing," Dave said.

Mrs. Thomas stared and smiled.

"Ayden pushed another boy."

"I did not," Ayden said.

"They had a disagreement about the slide, so Ayden pushed him."

Mrs. Thomas nodded. She asked Dave to wait for her to return and hurried to the double doors. When the door closed behind her, Dave swung Ayden's backpack on his shoulder and led the boy out of the school.

"Mrs. Thomas said to wait," Ayden said. Dave buckled him into the booster seat.

"It's almost dinner time," Dave said.

Ayden and Dave said nothing more about the fight, or Mrs. Thomas. Dave ordered a pizza, sat Ayden in front of cartoons, and set to work on tax returns. Next morning, Dave did as Anne had suggested. By the time Ayden was dressed, Dave had placed a bowl of cheerio's on the coffee table and turned the television to cartoons, and on the kitchen counter, wrapped in cellophane, a PB&J. Dave instructed Ayden to knock on the office door if he needed anything, and, except for a glass of water at noon, Dave worked in relative peace until two.

Ayden's knock came quiet and firm. He called Dave's name. Dave opened the door and found Ayden in his pajamas, the front of his pants wet.

"You know where the bathroom is, buddy," Dave said.

"I was watching cartoons."

Dave took Ayden's hand and brought him to the bathroom. Ayden stripped and Dave gave him a quick shower. Ayden wanted to wash his hair. Dave let him play in the warm water and got a fresh set of pajamas from the boy's bedroom. Dried and dressed, Dave asked if Ayden needed anything else. Ayden asked about Anne.

"Momma isn't feeling well," Dave said, "so she's with grandpa for the weekend."



"She didn't tell me that she wasn't feeling well."

"You find some good cartoons on TV?"

Ayden took a comb from the bathroom counter and ran it through his hair a few times.

"What if we call momma?" Dave asked.

"Grandpa taught me how to comb my hair."

Ayden pushed up his hair in the middle and tried to part it on the right.

"I should talk to your mom, anyway. Tell her about school yesterday."

"Didn't nothing happen at school."

"You hit another boy," Dave said as he left the bathroom. Ayden followed, still working at his part with the comb.

"I didn't do nothing," Ayden insisted.

Dave's back was to Ayden as he dialed Anne's number. "Your mom still needs to know."

Again Ayden asserted his innocence, this time through mounting sobs. Dave turned to him and pocketed the cell phone. Ayden's face was red, his eyes swollen. He didn't look angry or scared, only hurt.

"What did happen?" Dave asked.

"He didn't let me use the slide."

"You could have said something," Dave said. "Or done nothing. We were leaving."

Dave hunkered down in front of Ayden and brushed back his absurd hair. His face was still red, almost purple around the eyes, but the tears receded from the edges and Ayden smoothed the front of his shirt.

"I'll tell her about the other boy."

Ayden began working at the part in his hair.

"Can we go to the park after you call momma?"

"You know I have a lot of work to do," Dave said.

"Don't do a lot of work."

"Believe me," Dave said, "I would rather go to the park."

"Then let's go for just a minute."

"You can't go to the park for just a minute."

"Yes, you can, just for a minute."

"We'll call your mom first," Dave said, "and then we'll do something. Maybe not the park, but something. It'll be good for both of us."

Dave brought Ayden to the living room and sat him on the sofa. He brought a juice box and a bowl of grapes, which Ayden usually ate with his mother.

"I'm gonna call momma, okay?" Dave said. "You watch cartoons."

"Tell her I'll save her some grapes."

Dave shut the door to his office and sat in the desk chair. He did not expect Anne to answer her cell, and she didn't. He tried Anne's father's house. Gregg picked up the phone. Dave said hello. Gregg, recognizing Dave's voice, said, "hang on," and when the line was picked up again, it was Anne. Dave told her that Ayden beat up a bully on the



playground.

"What did the teacher say?"

"It's not a big deal, Anne," Dave said. "They're kids."

"And they could kick him out of the school for this," Anne said. "They won't refund tuition."

From Anne's end of the line a dog barked in the distance, and Dave could hear the television from his living room.

"I still have a lot to do," Dave said.

"It's one day."

"He wants to go to the park."

"Take him to the park," she said.

"When are you coming home?"

"It's one day. You can't tell me this is too much to handle."

"Then what's going on?" Dave asked, his voice rising. He thought of Ayden. "At least tell me what's going on."

"I just need to think about some things," Anne said. "It's fine."

"You can't think at our house?"

"Dave, it's just—"

"—or while you watch your son on the playground—"

"—not fair."

Dave's voice had risen. His cheeks were warm. He whispered an apology.

"Ayden is fine," he said. "We'll go get ice cream or something"

"Maybe frozen yogurt."

"Sure," Dave said.

"Thanks," Anne said.

"I'll see you tomorrow?"

"I'll call."

Dave would have taken Ayden for frozen yogurt, but he wasn't sure that the yogurt shop would have wi-fi, which he would have needed had he tried to work. Instead of working, Dave drank coffee while Ayden ate an ice cream cone. They laughed about funny words, like scintillant and euphonious. After the coffee shop, they walked across the street to the park, where Ayden fed the ducks with Dave's half-eaten muffin. Dave cooked spaghetti that night, and the two ate over a superhero movie. After the movie, Dave helped Ayden brush his teeth and then put the boy to bed. Ayden asked him to read a book of poems about trains. Dave tried to work late, but he could not concentrate. Neither could he sleep, and the few hours he managed were restless.

Sunday morning went off like Saturday. Clothes ready, breakfast waiting, lunch prepared in advance. Dave turned the television to cartoons and set out a big glass of water before closing the door to his office.

At ten, Ayden knocked. The cartoons were the wrong cartoons. At eleven, Dave

checked on Ayden. Ayden had dragged out every diecast car he owned into the living room, and they were scattered on the carpet from kitchen linoleum to the hardwood of the hallway. Dave did not yell, but he did raise his voice when he told Ayden to keep his toys by the coffee table. Dave helped Ayden collect the toy cars, asking about each, what they were and which Ayden liked best.

Dave again checked on Ayden after noon. On the coffee table was an open and overturned box of cheerio's, and crushed oat orbs intermingled with the cars on the carpet. Dave yelled. He felt his own father's presence as he clipped his words and ordered Ayden to clean up. Dave returned to his office and called Anne. She didn't answer. No answer at her father's house, either. Dave returned to the living room.

"I'm sorry I yelled," he said.

Ayden was scooping cheerio's two and three at a time and resubmitting them to the box.

"Why don't you put some shoes on," Dave said.

"Are we going to see momma?"

"We're going to grandpa's house."

Gregg, Anne's father, lived half an hour from Dave's cottage, not in a new neighborhood, but in the kind where the houses have more bathrooms than bedrooms.

At Gregg's front door, Ayden rang the doorbell. After a beat of silence, Ayden set his finger against the button, sending the chime into paroxysms until Dave could pull his hand away.

"What if grandpa isn't here?" Ayden asked.

"His truck is," Dave said, "so don't ring the bell like that."

"But I like to ring the bell."

"Yeah, but—"

Ayden's finger was on the button again. Dave yanked his hand away as Gregg opened the door. Gregg wore a pair of jeans and boat shoes without socks. Ayden put his finger in his nose.

"Son, stop digging," Gregg said.

"I have a booger," Ayden said.

"Jesus, Dave, maybe the boy needs a handkerchief."

Gregg tussled Ayden's hair as the boy wiped his hand on his shirttail.

"Didn't expect to see you boys," Gregg said, ushering the two inside.

Ayden found a place on the large leather sectional. He dug a remote out of the cushion and turned on the flat screen.

"Son, now's not the time," Gregg said.

"We can watch cartoons," Ayden said, pulling up a menu screen. "I still remember how."

"Not today, sonny. You and Dave won't be here that long," Gregg said and turned to



Dave. "Might as well sit."

A woman in sweat pants and a tangerine blouse emerged from the master wing of the house. She greeted Ayden in a cheery, unfamiliar voice.

"Cathy, how about some juice for the kiddo," Gregg said. "I'll have a beer."

"You must be Dave," Cathy said. "We have some Miller in the fridge."

"Dave's fine, ma'am," Gregg said.

"I don't want apple juice," Ayden said.

"Don't drink it, then, son."

"I want to play with the puppy."

Cathy returned from the kitchen with a High Life bottle and a plastic cup of juice. When she sat the cup on the table in front of him, Ayden went to the French doors that opened onto the backyard, set his forehead against the glass, and called, "puppy, puppy."

Gregg took the bottle from Cathy and settled into the sofa.

"Sonny, leave that dog alone," Gregg called, and then turned to Dave. "Damn thing pissed in the house. Paid fifteen hundred dollars to a breeder out in Texas, but Anne wasn't paying attention and let it piss on the carpet."

"And I didn't have anything to clean it with," Cathy said. "Tried the Pine Sol, but I'm not sure how well that'll work when it's dried."

"At least it smells alright," Gregg said. "Talk to me, Dave."

"Not sure where to begin," Dave said. He had never liked Gregg, except that he'd given Anne and Ayden a place to live for a couple of years. And maybe it was the beer bottle resting on his distending stomach or his posture on the sectional, his free hand hanging from the backrest, but Dave thought Gregg might want to help.

"Started Friday," Dave continued. He explained about the call from Anne, the playground fight, the taxes left to file.

"Son, come away from that window," Gregg said and turned back to Dave. "So he hit some kid."

Ayden returned to the sofa and began searching for cartoons.

"Why'd you hit that other boy?" Gregg asked.

"No reason," Ayden said.

"Ayden, tell the truth," Dave said.

"I didn't do nothing."

"The other boy wouldn't let him use the slide," Dave said.

"Just like you boys," Cathy said, now on her knees and working lemon-scented cleaner into a damp spot on the carpet.

"Hell, I'm proud," Gregg said. "Can't let people push you around."

"I didn't push nobody," Ayden said.

"The point is," Dave said, "now I have Ayden all weekend and I have a lot of work to do."



"What did Anne say?" Gregg asked.

"I can't get hold of her."

"She left this morning."

"I just wanted to slide," Ayden said, curling his legs underneath himself.

"Honey, take your feet off your granddad's sofa," Cathy said. "You ain't the one gotta clean it."

"I don't know what to tell you," Gregg said.

"Why don't I take Ayden out to play with the dog," Cathy said, standing.

"Leave that damn dog alone," Gregg said.

"Honestly, Gregg," Dave said, "I don't know what to do."

"Pretty normal at your age, son," Gregg said. "Think you know how to handle things, but it's all a lot bigger than you thought."

"Not much I can do," Dave said. "I have to finish—"

"—you thought having a kid would be easy?" Gregg said. "I sure can't help you. Anne left this morning."

"It's tax season."

"I can't take Ayden. I've done all I can to help you kids. That's between you and Anne, and I have people coming over this evening"

"Do you know where she went?"

"Not my business."

"And you can't watch your grandson for a night."

Gregg pulled from his beer bottle. "Dave, I'm glad you stopped by. Call ahead next time, though. I am an old man, after all."

On the car ride home, Ayden was quiet until Dave turned by the park.

"Is momma still sick?"

"I think so, buddy."

"It must be nausea."

"I don't know what it is," Dave said, turning onto his street.

"Do you know what's good for nausea?"

"I don't think it's her tummy."

"She should just not have nausea," Ayden said.

Dave didn't know what to say. He smiled at Ayden through the rearview mirror. Ayden began to push himself up in his booster seat.

"You have to stay seated, buddy," Dave said.

"There's momma's car."

Anne's hatchback was in the driveway.

"She must be feeling better," Ayden said.

Dave took Ayden inside the house. Ayden's toys were stowed in a cardboard box and some of Anne's clothes were laid out on the sofa. Anne emerged from the bedroom with

a heavy suitcase. Ayden ran to her, arms extended.

"Hold on, baby," Anne said, toting the suitcase into the living room.

"Cleaning up?" Dave said.

"Just doing what has to be done," Anne said and laid the suitcase on the floor. "Come here, baby."

Ayden walked to her, hesitated, but when he reached her, Anne wrapped her arms around his small frame and hoisted him against her shoulder.

"We're going on a trip, baby."

"You could probably use a vacation," Dave said.

Anne's attention was concentrated on Ayden. "We're going to see your Aunt Holly."

"Who's Aunt Holly?" Ayden asked.

"Good question," Dave said.

"You've never met your Aunt Holly," Anne said, "but I've known her for a long time."

"Where does Aunt Holly live?" Ayden asked.

"Atlanta, baby," Anne said. "There's a good school for you and a good school for momma."

"You're going to school?" Ayden asked before Dave could. "You're too old for school."

"You must have done a lot of thinking at your dad's," Dave said.

Anne sent Ayden to his room. He was to put his clothes on the bed. Anne sat on the sofa.

"The school called," she said.

"I still have to finish these returns."

Anne didn't say anything. She refolded a couple of shirts on the sofa.

"What's going on, Anne?" Dave asked and sat next to her on the sofa. She shifted and placed her hands in her lap.

"I have to do something."

"Like run away to Atlanta?"

"I'll work, go to school."

"And watch Ayden? Or is Aunt Holly going to do that with whatever all she has going on?"

"I don't know."

"You really don't know what you're going to do."

"I'm going to do something."

Dave stood. He looked into the cardboard box with Ayden's toys. One of the diecast car wheelwells was still encrusted with cereal.

"You don't get it, Dave."

"I really don't."

"I could get a teaching degree."

"In four years," Dave said. He tried to keep his voice calm, for Ayden's sake.



"How do you not remember? I almost finished my associate's."

"So three years, then. And teaching?"

"It could be anything."

"Why not nursing?"

"Sure."

"Or astrophysics—"

"—Dave—"

"—hell, run for president."

Anne planted her elbows on her knees and leaned her face into her hands. She shook her head. She was not crying. She looked up and smiled at Dave.

"It doesn't matter what I do," she said. "The point is to go and do something. I can't live with my dad, and I can't—"

"—right," Dave said.

"But I can't. It's not something that I can explain," Anne said, "except that I have to do it."

"What about Ayden?" Dave asked.

"What about Ayden?" Anne asked.

"How are you going to explain this to him?" Dave asked.

Anne stood. She folded over a stack of shirts and a stack of jeans. "He's young," she said. "He'll adjust."

Anne went to Ayden's room. Dave sat on the couch again. He pushed his hair back. He tapped his feet; right, left; right, left. He listened to Anne's voice, indecipherable and distinct, and to Ayden's sobbing. A few minutes later, they came out, Ayden pulling a small suitcase behind him. Ayden stopped in front of Dave.

"Momma says we're leaving."

"Yeah, going to the big city," Dave said. "It's an adventure."

"She says it's for a long time," Ayden said. His eyes were swollen and he had trouble meeting Dave's eyes.

"That's what happens sometimes, buddy," Dave said. "Things change when we get older."

"I'm already old. I'm five."

Dave put his hand against Ayden's face and pulled him in for a hug. Ayden kissed Dave on the cheek.

"I think there's some grapes in the fridge," Dave said. "Why don't you take them, for snacks on the trip."

Dave helped Anne load her car while Ayden ate grapes on the front door steps. Anne and Dave hugged, Dave and Ayden hugged once more, and then Dave was alone on the steps, waving as Anne's car moved away down the street and around the corner and out of sight.





## ARDEN XVIII

*DISTRICTS BY HAILEY MATTWIG*





UNTITLED BY HAILEY MATTWIG





## ARDEN XVIII

*PROXIMITY ALARMS (VIEWING THE CLERK AT THE COLUMBUS MUSEUM'S MEMORY CABINET)* BY ALYSSA HUDSON

Museum glass superimposes my face  
onto flaky stationary. Little dots of white  
and the ghost impression of bodies outside  
obscure the display. I hate the distortion,  
the seams: thin, straight, lines winding  
round museum goers who orbit around  
one another, using each other to measure  
the appropriate distance from the glass.

But remember sixteen, cramped against  
Bodies: writing utensils prohibited. They  
check us as we step off the bus. A senior  
has vandalized the naked, marble ass  
of a Greek in repose, overcome by his  
compulsion to mark the aged thing,  
the pure white figure behind an ineffective  
rope barrier. He'd been forbidden to touch.

But remember the chirp of the alarm  
when fingers are magnetized, drawn  
to the gold collars of the ancient dead,  
waiting away from their riches under clear  
cages. Remember the pinprick of desire,  
the curiosity to know the weight of strange  
objects. The texture, the cool temperature  
of metal touched only by the stagnant air.

Trained by alarms and glass, I try to keep  
distance, shamed when caught puffing  
breath out onto my reflection. I've disobeyed  
the instinct that demands a void between  
body and objects that aren't mine, objects  
like foreign bodies that call me now that their  
owners are absent. If I could touch them, I  
could puzzle out their connection to me.

There's a tiny hot air balloon. Below, right  
a silent typewriter, July 4 Independence Day

with 'J' a darkened leaf, traced curves dipping  
to try and kiss the 'I' in Independence. I'm still  
on the glass, squinting at the thinner letters  
with loops like the thin strands of a spider's web,  
hand cupped above my eyes to block out  
the light—waiting for alarm.

## ARDEN XVIII

*OVERFLOW BY ASHLEY COLBERT*







## ARDEN XVIII

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### *FOUNTAIN CITY BY BRADY STONICA*

Stones glisten in gurgling false streams,  
while tears plummet to a pool below.  
Water ripped from Nature fills its veins,  
yet this wish-giver's grief goes ignored.

Coinage from mints far and wide,  
is pelted into the pool by dreamers,  
as a high-noon sun casts a thousand  
diamonds, sparkling across Water's visage

Its change will not reenter circulation,  
nor can its water return to the clouds.

Each remains alienated and apart,  
stuck in this fountain's vicious cycle.

Just alone as coins or water,  
I sit at the edge, dipping a finger.  
Peering into the pellucid mirror,  
its surface ripples, creating wrinkles

on my face swimming among the coins.  
My ducts weep along with the fountain;  
I drown alone like the silver and copper,  
left behind to chase rainbows in the mist.

I wonder if the one that tossed me got their wish.



It's a long, low landscape as far as you would ever care to walk. Mountains probably rear from the earth within sight, but not within space. It's not in the frame, but you can imagine it. Geography is the heart of conquest.

This used to be a poppy field, guaranteed. Bet on it. The earth is loam, the sky is blue, the grass is probably knee high and wider than the eye of God. It's all swift falling field country, save a lonely wasteland line that leans in from the higher deserts to carry trucks north and south.

(It's all in black and white. Grainy, I know. Paint it. There's a canvas in your eyes.)

Brown trucks full of white men, black and brown men, laughing and smoking. Women in body armor who laugh the loudest or not at all. White pickups full of brown men robed in black and white, heavy bearded. Hard-eyed heroes. Tantric and taciturn by turns, carrying the arms of long dead conquerors up from drier country.

They kiss their mothers on the mouth and die for God. All of them, after their fashion. It is a holy war, and if you ever tell them otherwise, you're not lying—they were just collateral damage. The truth is, all war is holy. And jihad is the sacred soul of struggle.

But today there are no convoys, no caravans. No red Tomahawks, no white and blue Patriots. Today there's some poor fuck in a broken truck, and his prepubescent son.

(Black and white, a shaky frame. Grainy too, I know. Let me hold your hand. Let me guide your brushstroke:

There's a whirring sound somewhere between a helicopter and a hummingbird. This is normal. You expect it. Like the uncomfortable clap-clap-clap of all pornography. Tune it out and stroke on.)

The tailgate of the truck reads "TOYOTA." You can't make it out, but you know. The sharp lines of an early 90s shortbed Tacoma are as regular in-country and on-screen as the sight of distant mountains.

[illegible]

Chk. Five on five, I copy. Chk.

WhirrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrRRRRRRRRRR.

-REDACTED-

The Toyota and daddy are gone from the frame now. The kid squats over a sparse patch of roadside grass. His hands kick up cloudy dirt—dirt that’s been ground into fine, sepia dust over thirty years of constant foreign policy. The dust that covers the lens in so many war films. His hands kick up dirt.



Chk. Copy, five on five. Chk.

You hear the voice only vaguely, as from God.

The man tears in from the side of the frame, as if whipped by the scourge of heaven. It's hard for thee to kick against the pricks. He is erratic, hands scratch empty sky at you. Zolfiqar is in his heart, but his hands scratch empty sky at you. Little hands throw up dirt by the road.

Chk. We're hot. Chk.

You're hot too. Office buildings never quite get the air right. You stripped down to your undershirt hours ago, but the heat clings to your skin. Is your skin. There's no relief, save defleshing yourself. You're not prepared to go that far tonight. You've tried keeping your eyes on your second screen, but the whirl drags them on a leash. The whirl rubs your nose in the pile you've created, commands you fill yourself up with it. You eat only in fits and starts, and consider your skin again.

(The office isn't black and white. Feel free to picture all the shades of grey here. Grainy. Yes, I know.)

The man has the boy by the scruff, but you know what he knows. You hear what he hears. You've heard it all night. Once you've heard it, it's far past the hour for fleeing. Holy wars are somewhat quieter than they once were. You'd almost never even know.

(They do, of course, run. What else could they do? Not far. Two steps that way, three steps the other. Not fair either. But it was always too late. You can survive the Mercy Seat. I'm told the Cross can't keep a good man down for long. It's all so grainy, I know. Your veins could even reject an injection and spray your bloody spite all over the Prosecutor and Judge. But you can't fight what you won't hear until—)

Some flowers, I've heard, only bloom for a day. A moment, on the right scale. Up from a hollow in the earth, bright and yellow and red. Bright and yellow and red and full of a living sense of themselves and themselves alone. When they wilt shortly away, they leave precisely nothing behind. As though there never were any such flower. As though that black dirt below on your black and white screen was simply always black, never white. Never, ever grey.

Your eyes are filled with these poorly painted wonders. Grainy, I know.

I watch in silence as his hand shakes picking up the coffee cup. Without words, I place my hands over his, and he takes a sip. Our eyes never meet, it's not an act either one of us is proud of. He's ashamed his hands can't hold the cup steady. The wedding ring on my hand catches the light as I help him stand up and we walk into the bedroom. His wedding ring sits on a chain around his neck; it's too big for his fingers now. In the bathroom, I test the water with my hand and make sure it's not too hot or cold for his sensitive skin. He waits on the bed for my approval. Once in the tub, my fingers trace his skin, and I wash away the bad dreams from last night. It's quiet until he takes my small but strong hand in his weaker one.

"Wash my hair?" I snort, Daniel hasn't had hair in a year. Despite the laugh, I think back to when he did have hair and how much I miss running my hands through it. The thick brown locks would weave in and out of my fingers for hours as we laid on the couch watching television. Dressing him is almost clinical now. We don't look at each other we only watch as my hands button or adjust clothing. We no longer gaze into each other's eyes as I button the last button on his dress shirt or giggle like teenagers when I adjust his tie. In the car, the music plays while I drive the route I've remembered by heart. He's fidgeting. A nervous habit. I place my hand on his knee, and he grips it softly.

"Three more rounds." I whisper. Once parked we walk into the building. The smell assaults my nose as soon as the door opens. The stench of chemicals and death make my nose burn. I wonder if it's a made up smell or if Daniel can smell it too. He told me once that the therapy dulled his senses, he hardly tasted or smelled anything is what he said. During the two-hour process my finger's flip through multiple magazines, a lady cries softly across the room as a nurse tries to comfort her.

"You're a strong woman; everything is going to be okay." That's a lie. I flip to a different page.

"You just need to surround yourself with friends." Don't do that, they only remind you of things you don't do anymore. After flipping through my third magazine the nurse leaves the woman. I move and sit by her.

"You grow numb to different things. It helps to talk to people who are going through the same thing." She nods. She is telling me about her sister losing her hair. I try and tell her that's only the beginning in a kind manner. When Daniel is ready to leave, I give her my number. Opening the door for Daniel, I make sure he is tucked away and buckled in. Then we go home. Once again I open the door for him, he smiles calling me a "new age woman." I get him settled in the bed and kiss him. The smell of chemicals lingers around us; his lips taste sour. I've gotten used to that. He's sleeping, and I'm watching him. My eyes trace his pale shoulders, the freckles that use to stand out are now blended into the pale skin. I kiss them. Knowing he won't eat I let him sleep and eat alone. The night stays quiet even after



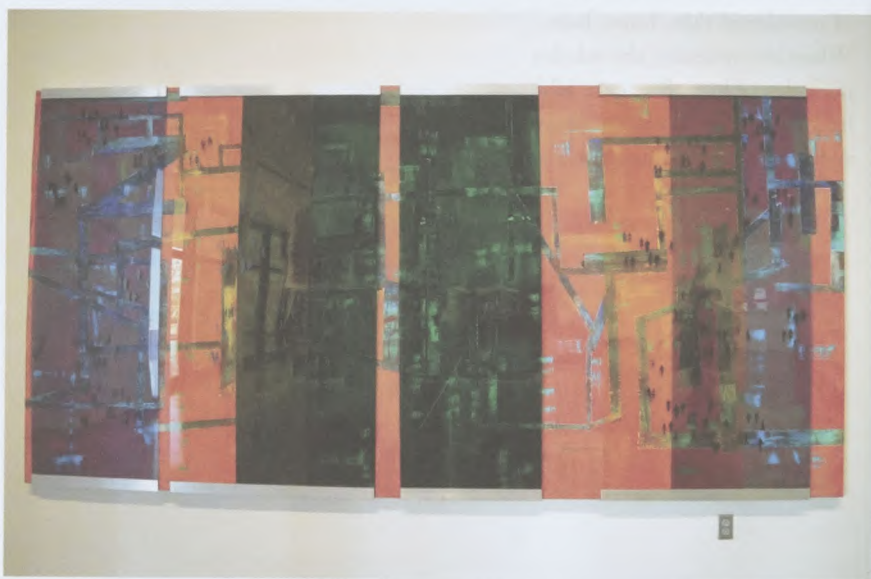
he wakes up. We use to laugh, talk; we stayed busy. Now we walk on eggshells; we act like if we try to be normal the other shoe will fall. He wants to bathe again, so I get it ready. It's silent as my soapy hands wash away the depressing day. My mind wanders in the silence, I think of my homework then I pray Daniel will get better. With a strong grip that catches me off, guard Daniel pulls me to him. Water sloshes all over the floor as I land in the tub with him. He laughs at my stunned face. He's laughing, I begin to cry. Pulling me towards him his hands brush the hair out of my face. He kisses me and his lips don't taste sour anymore. Our eyes meet as his hands unbutton my shirt.



When Uncle is released, wind  
carries him to water. He rests as film  
on the creek's surface, bubbles,  
sinks, carried over the bare feet  
of my aunts, cousins, my father—  
who grabs his own handful of ash.  
Father lets go downwind, lingering  
in the current, still on slick rocks,  
and watches his brother's daughter  
reach in the box for a fistful  
of powdered skin, bone, hair.  
When she releases, she inhales  
particles of him, fine gray ash  
hovering in air while minnows  
swirl round naked, motionless legs.

## ARDEN XVIII

CENSUS BY HAILEY MATTWIG



Our eyes strain as though we have not blinked  
in some time, and I have been seeing you. Air  
like the earth of an Indian summer swells from your nose.  
One by one the blonde hairs at the nape of my neck dry and rise.  
My breasts stick to your chest like cold, damp leaves  
to the concrete amid a December mist in the Deep South.  
My spine faces up; my color faces you. I am  
ugly, opaque, exposed, fragile. The dense bones  
of my pelvis compress yours. We sustain  
a small reservoir like a dip in the sidewalk  
after a heavy April rain. I had been seeing you—  
Sturdy. Concise. Purposeful. Unmoving—  
I have fallen on you now and I see you:  
a single, grey, passionless slab I have seen before.



## ARDEN XVIII

*RECLINING NUDE BY BUNNY HINZMAN*



The National Academy Award for Lifetime Achievement



B. Hyman





## THE NAARTJIE MULTIMEDIA AWARD FOR EXPOSITORY WRITING

## ARDEN XVIII

*THE FIRST LADY OF THE WORLD BY TARA VAN KLEEF*

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When America places a new president in office, irreversible history is created, and the response of a hesitant nation can be formidable. The people of the United States entrust the image of their homeland to the new, elected leader of the country implicitly – a daunting responsibility to any one individual. Sometimes it can be overlooked that the president indeed has a family, and that the family is under tremendous pressure to present itself in a way that can best represent America as a whole. In that way, one of the most influential members of the White House families may not always be the husbands; sometimes, it takes a wife, a First Lady, to govern a country. A woman's wisdom and compassion is sometimes what the world of politics and competition needs; an exemplary instance of these virtues exists with the memory of a Mrs. Anna Eleanor Roosevelt.

Growing up in the bustling urban hub of New York City at the turn of the 19th century, one might assume that Mrs. Roosevelt had her fair share of struggles as a young woman, as headstrong and opinionated as she was. Her problems, however, seemed to stem not from her own person, but from her family itself. Dealt a dysfunctional youth, Eleanor was joined by two younger brothers and a half-brother resulting from an illicit affair of her father's. Her father, a struggling alcoholic, jumped to his death just two years after her mother and brother succumbed to diphtheria, leaving a ten-year-old Eleanor to cope with the tragic loss of most of her young family. Her remaining brother was rumored to also drink reprehensibly in his later years; her family line was already prone to such addiction. After being taken in by her maternal grandmother, Eleanor continued to fight bouts of depression and insecurity that would follow her for the remainder of her life. Through her dark childhood, Roosevelt never developed consequential flaws that inhibited her, however, and persevered with inexplicable resolve and valiance at a commendably young age.

At fifteen, Roosevelt was tutored privately, a privilege for such a young girl in that time period. She was later sent to Allenwood Academy, a finishing school in Wimbledon, London, at the recommendation of her aunt, Anna "Bamie" Roosevelt. It was upon graduating from the school that Eleanor met her father's fifth cousin, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. They were engaged only a year later, in 1903, when Eleanor was only eighteen. The newlyweds' honeymoon period was fleeting, however, as Sara Delano, Eleanor's new mother-in-law, despised her son's wife. Sara ended up dictating the household in which the couple lived after Franklin's election to presidency, and was told to be controlling and possessive. Mrs. Delano eventually ended up parenting and disciplining Eleanor and Franklin's six children, which antagonized Eleanor, whose self-control, patience, and respect persisted even under such strain.

Roosevelt was very active in politics and had endless compassion for the Amer-



ican people. She was documented as the first presidential spouse to hold press conferences and to speak at national conventions. She was a trailblazer of sorts, and even managed to accrue over 75,000 dollars through her lectures and writing, most of which was benevolently given to charity. In a famous display of empathy, Roosevelt visited with a band of protesting veterans that had been previously struck with force at the hands of former president Herbert Hoover. Eleanor sang army songs with them, and talked over political concerns of the veterans. One marcher later commented, "Hoover sent the Army. Roosevelt sent his wife."

Coined "The Reluctant First Lady" in her biography, Eleanor Roosevelt was outspoken for her time, her concerns never unexpressed in the public eye. She resented the title of First Lady because of the past compliance it suggested, of the social confines it created that she felt she had to adhere to. This feeling of social obligation was something she sought to change, and her idealism and integrity made history. Anna Eleanor Roosevelt made a name for herself, a title other than the subjugated "wife of the president". Eleanor was a civil rights activist, a campaign head, a mother, writer, and politician. Mrs. Roosevelt was a leader in an era of American history where no woman dared lead.

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## ARDEN XVIII

ADDRESSING CONTEMPORARY EFFEMIPHOBIA IN TONY KUSHNER'S *ANGELS IN AMERICA* BY JESSICA SHEHANE

Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, consisting of the two plays *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*, confronts the American desire for binary categories: male/female, black/white, religious/secular, gay/straight and feminine/masculine. Through his use of characters, Kushner demonstrates the overall unrealistic nature of such categorization, most specifically in the case of the masculine/feminine divide. By contrasting effeminate characters such as Prior and Belize with more traditionally masculine characters like Roy, Joe and Louis, Kushner uses *Angels in America* to explore and ultimately subvert the gay community's struggle with the effemiphobic nature of the masculine/feminine binary struggle.

The initial problem in analyzing effemiphobia in *Angels in America*—or any other work—stems largely from the fact that 'effemiphobia' is still very much in its infancy as a term and a concept. Consequently, the definition of such a nebulous and new concept becomes difficult to articulate or define. Rooted in twenty-first century net neologisms and so-called 'Tumblr activism,' effemiphobia is most concisely defined as the cultural and prejudicial fear of men who defy the "heteropatriarchal sexual script" (Hill 145) by engaging in gendered behaviors that are typically considered female or feminine. Rooted in what Kierski and Blazina describe as "the male fear of the feminine" (155), effemiphobia can also be conceptualized as the backlash within the gay community against men who are perceived to play into the stereotypical role of the 'nelly' queer: the effeminate, submissive partner in a homosexual relationship.

While discussion of the specific term 'effemiphobia' may still be in its early stages, the overall concept certainly is not. The cultural prejudice against men who defy strictly prescribed gender roles has been explored by a multitude of scholars in the field of men's studies. A 2010 study by Mitchell and Ellis of over seven hundred college students examined the effect of the label 'gay' on the perceived masculinity of a man by third parties, finding that the label of 'gay' almost universally led third parties to evaluate a man as more feminine and less masculine (91). Moreover, the study found that a man who appeared physically less masculine as more masculine than a more muscled man who was labeled 'gay' (92). Thus, though it may be said that 'effemiphobia' is a relatively new term, the social ramifications of the behavior it describes are pervasively rooted in mainstream heteropatriarchal America.

Yet contemporary discussion on the Internet, especially on social media sites like Tumblr, has turned from the traditional analysis of effemiphobia from the viewpoint of the social majority (that is, heterosexuals) toward the inner self-discrimination and perpetuation of the effemiphobic attitude by the gay community itself. As illustrated by certain scenes in *Angels in America*, there is an internal backlash against men who are perceived to live up to the stereotype of the 'camp' gay: overly effeminate in mannerisms, speech and preferences. Louis decries Prior and Belize's

participation in drag as "sexist" (Kushner 98), with the implication that perhaps either his specific distaste or the greater community's distaste has driven Prior and Belize to become ex-drag queens. Belize himself decries his and Prior's "girl-talk shit" as "politically incorrect," to which Prior comments that Belize sounds "like Lou" (64). From these interactions, it becomes apparent that effemiphobia—experienced both by the effeminate and the masculine gay man—is an underlying tension that permeates throughout *Angels in America*.

To contextualize any discussion of effemiphobia in *Angels in America*, it first becomes necessary to concede the shortcomings of the text. Specifically, though *Angels in America* may decry the internal effemiphobia within the gay community, the text itself can (and has) been interpreted as unfair to actual female characters where it is generous to feminine men. Natalie Meisner notes that "while a spectrum of gender becomes available to most of the male characters through the performance of power and/or drag, the same is not available for the biologically female characters" (178). Using Harper as her main focus of analysis, Meisner points out that "audiences are encouraged to laugh at, not with her" (180) and maintains that the character represents the problematic "erasure of the biological female body within queer theory" (179). Moreover, Meisner points to a disturbing lack of interaction between female characters in the plays, to the extent that "friendship between women...is a matter of obscure taste and a perverse desire to go against the grain" where "friendship between men may not be perfect but it is necessary" (184). Indeed, in contrast to the male characters—the central focus of *Angels in America*—the few female characters the reader encounters come across as little more than bit actors, present only insofar as their connection to a male locus (Joe in the case of Harper and Hannah, Prior in the case of Emily) makes them relevant. Though subtitled "A Gay Fantasia on National Themes," it is clearly apparent that the gay community Kushner portrays excludes women entirely; the only mention of a lesbian character is early on in the play, when Prior notes that "Cousin Doris is a dyke" (20).

Despite the somewhat problematic representation of female characters and biological femininity within *Angels in America*, the text does confront the issue of effemiphobia in a positive and constructive way. Kushner presents the reader with an array of characters on the masculine-feminine spectrum: Roy and Joe on the far masculine end, Louis approximately somewhere in the middle, while Prior and Belize fall clearly toward the feminine end. In fact, a great number (if not the overwhelming majority) of conflicts in the plays occur within the context of interaction between characters at different places on the spectrum. However, contrary to the masculinity-centric 'fight the stereotype' position the reader sees Louis exhibit (Kushner 98), Kushner clearly establishes the more effeminate and classically campy figures of Prior and Belize as both moral and rational centers for other



characters in the play.

Prior functions as a moral and rational center of the text primarily in comparison to Louis and Harper, the latter of whom seems to occasionally return the favor by acting as an abstract moral center and comforting presence both in their shared dream sequence and when Prior visits the Mormon visitor's center where Harper is squatting. Harper and Prior are the only two characters within the play to share the unique trait of accessing the "threshold of revelation" (33) through which they obtain knowledge that they had no other way of mortally accessing: Joe's homosexuality, Prior's AIDS, and the relationship between Louis and Joe (33, 195). In Louis' case, the moral and rational balance is skewed more in Prior's favor: he protects Louis from the symptoms of his disease because he is well aware that Louis cannot handle the truth (39) and gently censures Louis for constructing a "cosmology" that "lacks an ending [and]...lets [Louis] off scott-free," suffering "no judgement, no guilt or responsibility" (43). In many ways, Louis' moral struggles throughout *Angels in America*—his abandonment of Prior, his relationship with Joe, the difficulties accepting that he knows nothing about Joe or what he does—can be linked back to his initial decision to abandon Prior, his moral center, when that relationship is no longer easy for him (50). And, at the conclusion of the play, when Louis and Prior make their difficult reconciliation, it is made abundantly clear that their relationship will ever be the same: it is irrevocably tainted. Louis and Prior can be amicable but Louis "can't [go] back. Not ever" (284). As Prior later tells the audience, "the world only spins forward" (290). There is no way for Louis to ever return to the point where his relationship with Prior (and thus, his own morality) is wholly unblemished.

In parallel, Belize functions as rational and moral opposition for both Louis and Roy Cohn. After Louis severs his relationship with Prior, the reader sees Belize fill in briefly when Louis' lofty ideals and endless theorizing need a thorough reality check. Belize criticizes Louis for being "ambivalent about everything" (100) and minimalizing the issue of racism in America (96). However, his interaction with Louis—places specifically when Louis is theorizing about how "power is the object" in America (94)—only serves to set the scene for his later interactions with Roy, who fully embraces that life is not about labels but about "who will pick up the phone when [he calls]" (46). More than Louis and even Joe, Roy is the extreme example of the self-hating, effemiphobic gay man. But despite the clear animosity between Roy and Belize, Kushner uses their relationship to demonstrate Belize's unwavering morality. Roy hurls verbal abuse at Belize (which Belize often returns in kind) but Belize gives Roy fair and honest advice on who to navigate the health care system as an AIDS patient, even going so far as to tell Roy to "watch out for the double blind" in the AZT drug trials (155)—an action that later saves Prior's



life. That Kushner would pair Roy as a foil to Belize, who is opposite Roy in almost every way, indicates a genuine attempt to confront the polarizing schism within the gay community: those who embrace their identity and do not eschew femininity and those who refuse to be identified and resent that the popular representation of gay men is effeminate and campy. To add even more evidence to Belize's function as moral guidance, when Prior begins to doubt the importance of gay men in American society, declaring that they are "just a bad dream the world is having" (158), it is to Belize that he expresses these doubts. Furthermore, Belize is the first person Prior informs about his encounter with the Angel and the person to whom he speaks most about his role as a prophet and angelic interactions—even if Belize is, more often than not, highly skeptical.

Though both Prior and Belize are criticized by Louis for performatively adopting feminine behaviors through the act of drag, the reader is simultaneously presented with evidence that Belize and Prior innately reject this criticism. In the dream sequence where Prior and Harper first meet, Prior is depicted sitting "at a large makeup table, applying his face" (Kushner 30). The fact that, in his dream, on the "very threshold of revelation" (33), Prior is reveling in his feminine side points to an inherent femininity that is more natural than strictly performative. Similarly, the reader can see Belize's rejection of Louis' (a stand-in here for the mainstream 'butch' masculine gay man—or at least the self-critical feminine) criticism by his decision to become an "ex-ex" drag queen (98). Belize and Prior are men who ultimately refuse to abandon a part of their identity because of outside criticism, which again puts both of them in contrast to Louis, who is guilty about everything (98); Joe, who has been coerced by religion into giving up his identity as a gay man; and Roy, who refuses to even be recognized as a gay man.

It is important to note, however, that Kushner does more than simply focus on the fact that certain characters in the play are different than others. He intentionally sets up a scene of chaos, one where no one really agrees on what is right or what is fair, where the mere concepts of binary 'right' and 'wrong' are thrown into a pool of gray relativity. Even the establish moral centers of the play, Prior and Belize, engage in behaviors like theft, doubt and petty jealousy that would seem to conflict with their roles in the play when viewed in the context of traditional binary morality. But Kushner offers resolutions within *Angels in America* between the effemiphobic, masculine gay characters and the more effeminate figures that are Belize and Prior. Roy's death—specifically the selfishness and clout that being so effemiphobic and self-hating won him—save Prior's life when Belize and Louis steal the remainder of his stash of AZT; Belize even coaxes Louis into saying the Kaddish for Roy, chiding him that "a queen can forgive her vanquished foe" (265). Louis rediscovers his own morality, leaves Joe, and tentatively repairs his friendship

with Prior.

*Angels in America* was written in 1993 but, despite the very hopeful tone at the play's conclusion, little has changed in the subsequent eighteen years in regard to discrimination within the gay community against its own members. Effemiphobia has only recently been named, let alone fully discussed and the implications wholly rationalized, and it remains a topic of discussion still couched somewhat in taboo regardless of its inherent link with feminist concerns. There exist an entire slew of stereotypes within the LGBTQ+ community that stem directly from internalized effemiphobia, not just the typical effeminate gay man but also the stereotypical masculine lesbian and the derogatory appellation of 'femme' toward traditionally feminine gay women. For both effeminate gay men and traditionally feminine gay women, the community's internalized effemiphobia has created an exclusionary atmosphere that leaves them as acceptable sexual partners but renders them as unacceptable relationship partners, as entering into a relationship with them is conceived as somehow giving in to the stereotype (in the case of gay men) or 'selling out' of the cultural identity (in the case of gay women). The most overarching difficulty of this hidden culture war is winning admission that effemiphobia even exists which, harkening back to its inherent link with feminist concerns, comes with its own laundry list of cultural problems. Even more problematic is the lack of discussion regarding how effemiphobia affects the heterosexual community, specifically in regard to how feminine heterosexual men find themselves in the same scorned position as effeminate gay men and feminine gay women. (Hill 145).

However, it must be noted that Tony Kushner's message in *Angels in America* is ultimately hopeful: through the characters of his play he offers a worldview in which reconciliation between the two sides of this controversial schism is possible. There is a solution, and it lies in both accepting that some men are, by nature, more effeminate and some are not. It required accepting that some men have sexual interaction with other men but do not necessarily identify as gay, or members of a 'gay community.' And even though *Angels in America* is woefully lacking in its representation of the lesbian experience, it is not altogether difficult to apply the message broadly to that portion of the LGBTQ+ community as well. Kushner urges the reader to recognize that a person does not necessarily have to adhere to a predetermined script of behavior in order to belong to a community. More importantly, he urges readers to acknowledge the wide variety of individual identity and to strive for the maturity to realize that these differences are not impermeable divides between people. Like Belize, Kushner urges his readers to be the victorious queen who can forgive her vanquished foes. Acceptance, like forgiveness, comes slow—but it does come. "It isn't easy, it doesn't count if it's easy; it's the hardest thing" (264).



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THE BRICK ROAD GREER PRIZE FOR POETRY

## ARDEN XVIII

*FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH A SKELETON BY ZELMA MAE CABLE*

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The first time I saw her, she was raining  
anointing her head with coarse salt and water,  
Heavy as my mama's oversized overcoat slung over  
her carcass, protecting it from a thunderstorm.  
Her eyes sparked lightning-  
a sudden shot that whipped  
The girls' bathroom with a fistful of briars-  
leaving counterfeit grins and expendable expressions behind.

The first time I saw her, she was humming along  
to Chopin Waltz in A Minor  
-posthumous  
Dancing with the idea that the delicate curve  
of her collarbone was too clunky  
Her skeleton too fragile to  
brace the mass of flesh attached  
To the sheer hands and ideals  
holding her together.

The first time I saw her, I wondered how it felt  
to have the dingy school floor and vile commode  
As your best friends-  
I decided that I did not want to know.  
I wondered if she saw what I did:  
a sunset of a girl, waiting for the stars to welcome her,  
For the moon to embrace her as part of himself-  
I decided that I did not want to know.

The first time I saw her, I asked for her name.  
she said she had many,  
That none of them mattered  
that all of them mattered.  
Liar, slut, obese, disgusting: names that  
did not, could not, why not,  
Maybe/possibly/actually did  
apply to her

The first time I saw her, she held her stomach  
as though it was a sparrow which had



Happened upon her way- sickly, pathetic, rabid  
not worth saving, but saved all the same.  
A ring of vomit brown as her irises and  
red as her sclera encircled her head as a halo  
The first time I saw her, I backed away;  
the second time I saw her, I regretted it.

## ARDEN XVIII

*ANNE, AND WHAT SHE LEFT ME* BY CRAIG BARKER

It fell on a Tuesday, and I wore my father's old white shirt,  
washed it the night before to get rid of the dirt,  
with the trousers I'd worn in a school prom throng.  
His shirt was too big; the trousers were short instead of long.

My hair was a mess, the cuts on my knuckles were still there,  
healing reactions, my fist versus the wall after I'd heard.  
The charcoal tie was too tight, clumsily looped around,  
the lump in my throat pressed against it when I sat down.

I remember the draft creeping like fog between the pews,  
rippling over my polished shoes - the only thing new.  
For a fleeting moment it was like you were there,  
letting off a whistling sigh paired with a bemused stare.

You were younger, happier, nodding with a warm grin  
at the patch of winter-white flesh glowing above my shin.  
I stopped listening to the sermon the vicar vomited then,  
thought about sunny Summer days instead of stitched hems.

Thought about cracked china, peppered eggs and a toast soldier  
thought about your fading at home, refusing to get any older.  
I was proud of you then, happy on a day I didn't think I could be,  
and I knew then that was all you would've wanted from me.

The taxi earlier, had been late by just over a minute.  
I hadn't minded (reading a book), but my mother was livid;  
she'd yelled at the driver, although we'd made it on time,  
worried we'd offend relatives - we were still the earliest to arrive.

One of your school friends called me cute while we waited,  
I thought that perhaps I'd reminded her of someone she'd dated,  
a redheaded boy she'd known way back in her youth,  
My heart broke later in the day, when I learnt the truth.

Sad, that for the time we spoke she saw someone else in me,  
I was the husband she'd once had; her mind lost back in 1953.  
That scared me, more than death, but what death meant,  
the idea of losing it all to nothing, the time we'd spent.

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Forgetting journeys on buses into town as a crimson child.  
Forgetting your grey, wired hair, that slanted smile.  
Forgetting our last day, forgetting the way I shivered  
when the church doors opened on the graveyard by the river.

Forgetting the sudden rush that spread through my bones  
when I realised, in autumn air, that life had rarely meant more,  
and that it hadn't come too late, even though you were over.  
I didn't even care about the shirt still limp upon my shoulders.



## ARDEN XVIII

## THE ORLENE JONES POULSEN AWARD FOR FICTION

## ARDEN XVIII

*VAPID PURPLE BY JACOB DEL TORO*

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With the morning grey, the dreams scurried away and back down the rabbit hole; Joel tried to follow them back into the darkness, but the grip of the grey had already sunken in. It dragged him back into its realm.

Joel's eyes peaked open: the grey pupils shrinking at the harsh gloom of the morning. The implant on the back of his neck tingled as it began to adjust to the now active host. He sat up and looked over at the boy's body next to him. He touched the boy's grey skin. Cold. Stiff. He didn't budge or react to the goading. Joel lifted up the fragile wrist and scanned the meter. Empty.

A piercing buzz broke the silence of the apartment. They had only an hour before the day began. The boy finally rustled and his eyes from behind the mat of dark hair soon opened revealing the same grey stones that rested in his father's head.

"Hungry," uttered the boy.

"Yes, hungry," responded Joel.

The apartment was not very spacious. There was the bed that the son and fathered shared, a shower and toilet behind a curtain, and the kitchen. The cold wind blew in from the city streets and chilled the two to the bone. Joel sat erect at the table listlessly spooning the meal into his gaping mouth. At the other end of the table, sat the mirror image of the grey figure. All was silent except for the undiscernible drivel spilling over from the screen. They paid no attention to it or one another. The fact that they had exchanged three words this morning was unusual. When the meter was empty, the boy rarely noticed the man's presence. Only the occasional twitch at his breath affirmed the connection of the two beings. But for all purposes, that grey morning, Joel was eating alone again.

A black precipitate was coating the city when the two left for their day. The rain fell unto the indifferent city ignored. No umbrellas sprouted up from the flow of residents. No one quickened their pace as they strode through the wet grey. The stream was constant and uninterrupted as Joel and the boy slipped into the crowd. The rain furiously harshened as if in the effort to cause some sign of notice, but no. The stoic faces in entire looked straight and unflinching as they continued to their respective jobs.

Joel continued on as well with the boy at his side. In the dimness of dawn, he could see the glowing implants attached to necks and the meter on the right wrist of every one. They emitted a dim blue light. Empty. Of course they were all empty. It was only the beginning of the day. These people wouldn't be able to be full at this hour. From the solemn flow, the mutterings of the Empty could be distinguished: a low chant that permeated the air like a haze. Hungry. Work. Tired. Hungry. Not hungry. Work. Work. Work. Work. Work. Work.

But through the whispers of these men and woman and children another word was spoken. It was uttered with an uncommon reverence rarely seen at this hour. It rolled around on their tongues tingling and sparking then it all of the sudden as if



shot leaps from their lips leaving only a faint taste upon the tip. Eema. Eema. Eema. Eema. Eema. Eema. Eema. Eema.

Without purpose, Joel found that word in his mouth. A longing could be felt within the pit of his stomach. His hand clasped the meter on his wrist and he began to violently tremble. His head was light and tipsy at every syllable of that utterance. Finally, what the rain had wanted occurred. A fervor seemed to have spread through the listless crowd as their pace quickened. The blue lights of the Empty bobbed up and down as they hurried to their destination. Work meant pay. Pay meant Eema.

But before Joel could get to work, he had to first drop off the boy at the education center. The towering gates encompassed the cement building, an ugly jutting protrusion into the sky. Child after child was dropped off by their parents and left to learn. What the boy learned was unknown to Joel. Even if he wasn't empty he wasn't sure the boy would discuss it with him at the dinner table. The two figures stood at the gates a moment longer than most. Joel looked down at the boy. The boy didn't look back, but before he left, he squeezed Joel's calloused hand. The fragile fingers were barely felt, but the action itself was an anomaly. Perhaps if he wasn't empty, he might've even smiled.

Joel's occupation was at the Foundry. A behemoth of a facility retching its black plumes into the grey sky. Inside the cavernous station, Joel set to work welding the rigid beams together. His grey eyes were covered by a dome mask that surrounded his face. His breathing sounded metallic and muffled. In the sinister orange-red glow of the fires, Joel looked like some malformed automaton. His consistent movements only assured the transformation. The dazzling sparks flew as he welded each of the two beams that were placed in front of him as his breath wheezed through the mask. Perfected by countless repetitions, the weld was virtually seamless. Joel had no knowledge of how time was passing. There were no ticking of clocks in the Foundry, and in the glow of the foundry, it was a constant sinister twilight. But he continued on. His pace neither slowed nor quickened. When the piercing buzz alerted for break, Joel muttering went to crowded mess hall and ate a silent meal with his peers. Their grey faces all blended together as he walked. There was no way of telling the grim visages apart even if he had bothered to know their names. They didn't know his name he knew. If he had spoken at all during his time at the Foundry, it was the occasional Tired and Work of the Empty.

Then the buzz rang two times. The hammering and the sparks ceased. The collective hands of the men flinched towards the glowing meters on their right hand. Two meant end of shift. End of shift meant pay. Pay meant Eema. The line of domed men jostled and struggled like ants towards the wage desk. Feet were stomped and smashed and elbows were flung towards teeth which chipped. Joel was no passive. The urge was too strong. How long had it been? Was it really only a day? The sharp

sound of his boots on the steel floor was interrupted as it planted unto a soft hand. He looked down, as the bluish lump of splintered bones. But he didn't stop. It was only a few more steps away. Over the mutterings of the frenzy the sound of the dispensers could just be distinguished. As Joel reached the head of the frenzy, The machine with its two doves spouted out its tune; it was high and repetitive; like a flame, it attracted the men towards it soft red glow. The tune rose: a monotonous symphony of strings and brass heralding the wage.

In the reflective metal casing, Joel's bloodied face was illuminated by the crimson glow. The Stoic mask cracked a little by the shewed nose and throbbing lip; he extended his hand eagerly waiting.

"Hello, Joel! And how was your wonderful day? Exciting as usual I hope," recited the machine. The two doves swiveled to leer down at his outstretched hand.

He didn't reply to the singsong voice of the dispenser only reiterated his desire by shoving out his other hand greedily.

"Excellent! EemoCo. proudly wishes you luck on your pursuit of happiness, Joel! We hope you enjoy your serving of eema. Remember, happiness is to be earned," replied the machine to Joel's pregnant silence. A slight purring could be heard and out came the red pill.

Joel could barely contain the tremors which racked his body. His tendons ached to swallow the ruby-like pill right this second; his tongue watered and salivated at the luscious little pill. His slate eyes were the only thing that remained a resemblance of his former self.

A filthy hand quickly reached out from behind Joel and snatched the pill away. Joel spun around to catch the thief's hand just after it shoved the pill down that fat gullet. Joel's grip tightened to that a vice; his grey eyes locked into the rotund man's own. With a swift jerk, he stabbed his fist into the man's maw. The room had become silent all except the singsong of the Eema dispenser and the gagging of the man's throat. The fingers stripped past teeth and tongue to reclaim the precious pill which now was covered in spittle and blood. The thief sunk to his knees in the center of the now placid crowd, a coughing mess of fat and filth. The Empty workers stared at the criminal. The Eema dispenser had now reached a crescendo in its singsong as the workers began to close in around the Eema thief. They flowed around Joel sidled towards the exit with his wage in hand. The mutterings arose past the singsong of the machine. "Happiness is to be earned," they muttered. The circle closed around the man who only sat with his head bowed and his arms crossed. His mouth dripped drivel.

Joel left the Foundry as a thought penetrated the empty: I think his name was Stephen.

That night as the grey of the dusk slipped into the dark of the cloudless night, Joel sat beside the young boy. They sat at that dining table in the small kitchen. The



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small screen was only playing repeated announcements of today with the intermittent tune of the Eema commercial. The boy stared across the table and through the man. He may have been looking through the window into the moonless void. The gaze looked as though it went past the building's that dimly shone and past the specks of helicopters and even past the jewels of the stars; until, the red Eema tablet clacked onto the table. Joel had carefully washed off the remnants of the man's spittle earlier. His hands which had just ripped it from a jaw delicately shined and bathed the ruby-like pill until the pristine luster returned. The blood and grime of today coincidentally slipped down the drain as well.

Now, the boy's eyes locked onto the Eema. Joel's eyes could simply feel the same desire and absence which screeched through the boy's system. The meter on his wrist now burned from the irritating itch. Slowly and tenderly, Joel cupped the boy's cold pale hand into his and enclosed the pill into those fragile fingers.

The pill slid down the boy's throat. A beeping could be heard from the boy's meter. It vibrated and the bar gradually filled until it shone a resplendent red. Warmth radiated out from his core. He shivered in ecstasy. A small sweat began to run down his temple mixing into the salty tears which poured from his eyes. His nose scrunched and wriggled. His toes curled. Climaxing in a radiance, the boy's grip became burning hot in Joel's limp hand. His small lips parted into a harlequin grin which disfigured the young boy's visage; it was so alien. Finally, his eyes opened a sparkling blue among the grey tone of his flesh all except his now pink cheeks. They stared into the man's ashy eyes, into the mask that was his father's face.

"Thank you, Papa!" shouted the boy as he ran to embrace his father.

The light arms enveloped the figure of the father, unrequited. The father's meter dimly illuminated the room in a somber blue battling the passionate rouge of the youths. The two lights of the meters mixing into a vapid purple at the center.



## ARDEN XVIII

*BLACKBERRY PICKING BY ALYSSA HUDSON*

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"When are they shipping the body back?" Vanna asked.

Perla's hands stilled, and she opened the oven. A waft of hot air warmed the back of Vanna's neck. Perla stared inside, into the orange glow, shook her head, and closed the door again. The hinges squeaked.

"They're shipping her ashes back within the week."

Vanna snatched up her pen, began clicking and unclicking it. "I thought we were having a wake."

Perla set her towel down on the counter in a sharp motion but didn't seem to know what to do with her hands. Her fingers twitched, hanging there in the air while she struggled without something to hold. For a moment, it looked like she might pick up the towel again, but her arms dropped to her sides. "You know how your sister was. She never wanted us to go into debt over a funeral."

Vanna bit at her lip, then began drumming her pen against the table. Her mother winced at the sound. "I just thought we'd get to see her again."

"She wanted to be cremated, and we didn't see the point of shipping her body from Virginia to Georgia when we couldn't even let people see it at the wake."

"The cops didn't have anything to say about it?"

Perla sucked in a breath. "It was an accident. She was just driving tired again."

"She was always tired."

"Vanna."

She pressed her fingernails into the wood of the kitchen table, feeling her skin crawl with heat. "This is bullshit."

"Go home." The words came out so choked Vanna almost didn't understand them. "You haven't slept in days."

Her mother flipped the towel over her shoulder. "We're going to have a casket at the wake with Marta's things in it, to remember her by. Pick out some of the things she left with you."

Outside, Vanna stood in the hot air for a minute looking but not really taking in the house across the street. She raised a hand. It shook.

"You should come and live with me," Vanna said. She could hear her sister breathing on the other end of the phone.

"I still have bad days," Marta said.

"We'll half the rent, the utilities. You can do the laundry. I'll do the dishes."

Silence.

Vanna pinched herself hard on the wrist, listened to the sound of her sister breathing. "You talk to Mama?"

"For a few minutes," Marta said, "about the new prints on my website."

"It's going good, isn't it?"

Marta didn't answer right away, and Vanna could hear the tap running. "I thought about it again."

"Did you call someone?" She had her checklist of questions.

"I'll call next time," Marta said. "I promise."

Vanna opened the door for her mother, and Perla stepped inside, shucking off her shoes. "It's on the coffee table."

"I can't decide on a picture for the wake," Perla said. "I love the graduation photos but we all know she hated them."

"She only hated them after Auntie May made that comment about her awkward smile."

Perla shook her head, focusing her attention on the cardboard box on the coffee table. She pulled out a white coffee mug with yellow flowers. *Be happy!* was written in curly, black letters on its side.

"What about the beach photos?"

"She wouldn't want us to put up pictures of her in a bathing suit."

Perla inhaled, and Vanna watched the way her chest pulled in, fascinated by the quickness of the movement. "Whatever you think is best."

"I'm not trying to be difficult."

"I just want people to remember what she looked like now. All I can see is those photos of the car."

The police had given the photos to her mother, and she was the only person who had seen them. "Can I see the pictures?"

"Why in God's name would you want to see them?"

"I don't know. I just do." She licked her lips, turned her eyes to the big window in her living room. The summer sun made her pale blue curtains glow.

Inhaling, Perla closed her eyes. She waved air into her face with her bony hands, as if trying to revive herself. When she spoke, her voice was higher than usual. "No-body else needs to see them."

Vanna fought to control her anger. Her mother was upset. They needed to find a photograph for the casket. "There's that one picture, where we stopped by the road to pick blackberries."

Her mother started at her for a long time before nodding, reaching into the box again, "Yes, I think she'd like that one."

When Vanna got out of the car, she gave the tires a good look before kicking at them lightly with her boots. The rubber quivered, and red clay vibrated off, flicking off onto the grass. Marta didn't notice the muddy mess on Vanna's tires. When Vanna came around the passenger side of the car, she watched Marta slide straight



into the ditch, going right for her target: the tangled mess of brambles at the end of the ditch. She cupped her hands above her eyes to block out the sun. It was early July, too late for blackberries, but Marta had seen them from the road. It had been the red ones that had caught her eyes, and there were plenty on the bush: green, red, and black. Their heavy bodies clustered together, dragged the offshoots to kiss the ground. Marta slowed a little when she got right up to the mess, dark head dipping. She went still, looking at the bushing, thinking, and as usual, Vanna wished she knew what was going through her sister's mind. It seemed simple to puzzle out. Marta was looking at her bare legs, probably concerned about cutting herself up on the thorns, but there was always the chance her sister's mind was veering off into darker spaces.

"I've got some leggings in the truck," she called.

Marta's head perked up, and she cupped a hand over her eyes and pivoted to look at Vanna. "Think my ass will fit into them?"

"I think you'd better try."

Marta climbed out of the ditch and Vanna went to the trunk, popped it open and retrieved the leggings. She checked the tag; they were labeled M/L. She thought they should fit her sister and handed them over to Marta when she came up.

"Thanks." Marta kicked off her shoes and worked the leggings on.

"I want those back."

"Where's my green dress again?"

"Move in with me, and you'll see it again." Vanna stuck out her tongue.

Marta went still for a second but quickly went back to tugging the waistband of the leggings up over the swell of her hips. When she was done, she smoothed the fabric of the skirt of her dress and slipped back into her shoes. "I don't want to drag you down."

"We all have bad days." Vanna knew it was the wrong thing to say, even as she said it.

Marta patted Vanna's arm with a shake of her head. "Yeah," she said with a smile, rapidly drooping. She stepped away before Vanna could respond, heading back to the blackberries.

Vanna watched as her sister used the skirt of her white dress as a sling to hold the berries, smiling even though Vanna suspected she didn't feel good after their conversation. It was part of those patterns Marta was trying to break. She always mulled over every conversation she had, picking apart all the things she'd done wrong, all the things she said, shouldn't have said, should have said. Maybe though, this time her sister was focusing her attention on blackberries, breaking the pattern. Maybe she was finally learning how to do that.

Maybe it was the actual truth of it because Marta looked happy, standing in the



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ditch in the brambles, smiling. Vanna pulled out her phone, squinting at the screen in the bright light, sliding through the apps to pull up her camera. Her fingers shook and sweat dripped down her neck. Her sister always looked best when she was focused, and Vanna didn't have enough pictures of her. Marta now was so still, hands on her skirt, trying to decide which berries topic next. Vanna raised her camera, but she still didn't see anything. It was too bright in the summer sun, but she located a shape that was probably Marta's head, snapped a half-dozen quick shots, stopped. Marta reached for another berry, plucked it off the bush. She snapped one more photo for good measure and put her phone back into her pocket without looking down. The whole bush trembled from the shockwaves of Marta's intervention, and she couldn't look away.

This was one of the good days.

Stationed at the entrance of the funeral home, Vanna became used to the ritual of shaking hands and hugging and pulling from the same stock of sentences: Yes, my sister was too young. It was good that it had been a quick death. You're probably right. She probably didn't feel any pain. Thank you for keeping us in your thoughts and prayers. Where's Mama? In the room to your left with the casket.

She'd been in that room all night. Every time she thought about moving there, going to see the casket her mother had set up, she ended up tugging the sleeves of her black button-down, the one she'd borrowed from her sister and never returned, and taking a single step forward. She took that one step many times, but she could never make herself move far beyond the double doors. Her legs didn't feel like they would support the journey to that room, and she felt safe by the entrance, by the vases of yellow roses her grandmother had sent to honor Marta.

Her mother came out of the room later in the evening with red eyes, and she hugged everyone in between herself and Marta before coming to speak with her.

"I need some fresh air." Perla rubbed her hands along her cheeks, trying to wipe them dry. She didn't touch Vanna, hadn't since they'd gotten the news. "It's time to say goodbye to your sister."

For two or three minutes after her mother left, Vanna remained by the door. Her hands shook, but she inhaled, held, exhaled, and took another step. The bones in her legs sent out little shocks of pain, and she didn't know why it hurt. Her sister wasn't inside. No ashes. No remains. Just a congregation of her things the family had gathered into a pile.

When she reached the doorway, she saw that the room was darker than she pictured it. Her sister's apartment had been bright and clean to encourage happiness. It was, her sister claimed, part of her cure.

Vanna went right to the casket, eyes fixed on the wall, so she wouldn't scare

herself away. She saw the teddy bears, even though Marta didn't care for them, her Be Happy! mug, and several framed photos. Next to the casket, was the blown-up version of one of the blackberry picking photos she'd sent her mother. Not the best one, she thought with a frown, but she liked to believe Marta would have been okay with it, the one with her hand outstretched. Her smile there wasn't awkward.

Vanna didn't know what to say, even in her head, to the strange sight. Marta's dark hair should be arranged neatly on the cream satin, and Vanna should have been able to say her goodbyes to a peaceful, made-up face. She should have been able to touch her sister's cold hands and feel like there was some part of her still lingering in this world—but her ashes hasn't even been shipped and parts of her could probably never be recovered. Whatever connected them together had dissolved, no longer lingered, and Vanna couldn't find it in herself to do anything but stare at the items making indents on the lining of the casket and pretend to pray out her goodbyes.

Vanna searched through her kitchen cabinets for the strainer and found it behind a stack of Chinese takeout containers. She didn't remember putting it there and decided to give it a rinse before using it. The water got hot right away since her sister was in the shower. Vanna ran her fingers along the mesh with a little soap, rubbing until there were substantial bubbles forming around the tiny openings, before flipping it upside down to rest in the sink. She pulled out the sprayer and sprayed the wire until the water ran clean. Vanna examined it for a moment to make sure she'd gotten all the soap before cutting off the water and filling the strainer with Marta's blackberries. She turned the knob for the cold water until it was coming out in a quiet stream and gently cleaned the berries with her hands.

She heard the shower turn off. A door opened and closed. Her sister was walking around Vanna's bedroom, opening and closing her dresser drawers. It was quiet for a stretch. Vanna's closet door squeaked as it was swung open, squeaked a little differently as it was swung close, then clicked shut. Marta was getting dressed while she patted the blackberries dry.

Marta came into the kitchen with a red towel wrapped up on top of her head. "I stole my Florida t-shirt back."

"Goodie. Just don't take back the green dress. I was going to wear it to a party."

Marta laughed and came over to select a few blackberries. She popped one in her mouth, eyes closing at the taste. "Totally worth the mess I made of my dress."

Vanna ate one, not really understanding her sister's love for them. Maybe she'd gotten one that wasn't perfectly ripe, she thought, and tried another. It was sour. Her eye spasmed, and she eyed the strainer full of berries with distrust. "Soak it in the bathroom sink. I'll see if I can get the stains out with a little bleach."



"Don't bother."

"It's a nice dress."

"These are nice blackberries." Marta laughed at her face. "If you want to, you can wash it and keep it." She ate a blackberry, made a face.

Vanna smiled, triumphant.

Sticking out her tongue, Marta grabbed a handful. Vanna thought she looked happy. "Good day then?"

Marta didn't look at her, didn't answer for a long time. She ate her handful of blackberries one by one, enjoying the variations of taste. "Yes," she said, finally, "a good day."

A few days after the wake, she contacted the Virginia police about her sister. The policeman, who sounded sympathetic and raspy over the phone, asked four times if she was sure about the photos. They'd been on the phone for twenty minutes, verifying that she was actually the sister of Marta Cabunada rather than some stranger with a morbid curiosity and, another few minutes going back and forth about the actually sending of the photos. He wasn't comfortable sending them via email, but Marta swore so fiercely that she wouldn't share them that he'd sent the jpegs to her account, hanging up after a sigh into the phone and a quiet, "My condolences."

She went to her email, at first, only to see if the email had come through as promised. It had. Vanna circled it with her pointer but didn't click. Her leg jumped under her desk. She went and made herself dinner, couldn't bring herself to eat it, and then returned to her computer. Vanna thought, dimly, that she was developing her own pattern of avoidance.

She forced herself to break it.

She opened the email. The officer, she noticed, hadn't included a subject or body. There were just a bunch of thumbnails, and Vanna could already make out her sister's gold car, the telephone pole, some of the damage. Without allowing herself time to think, she opened the first thumbnail.

It was a shot of the whole car, the telephone pole looming over it. The hood was scrunched up, revealing dark metal and plastic, and the drivers' side door had been thrown open. From the distance, she couldn't make out any details. She went to the next photo. It was the front of the car, one of the front wheels turned almost so they were perpendicular with the rest of the car. Had her sister tried to swerve to avoid the pole? The next was the one she wanted, the drivers' side seat. They'd taken her sister, tried to save her. The seat wasn't covered with blood, but there was some, flecks of it on the dash, on the steering wheel, on the shattered, spidery windshield. The next, the back of the car, looking less damaged. The passenger side seat, its window rolled down, made it difficult to see some of the blood on



the driver's side. There was nothing in the passenger seat itself except shards of the windshield. A close-up of the mangled parts: the tires, the windshield, the headlights.

Vanna rose from her chair, feeling out of sync with her body, and dropped into her seat at the kitchen table. She took a bite of her dinner. It was lukewarm, and she couldn't make herself chew it. She thought she should make something else, or better, get out of the apartment. With a burst of energy, she got up, plate in hand, and threw her food away. After she set the plate in the sink, she put on her shoes, grabbed her purse, but she didn't go to the door. She hurried back to the computer and examined the contents of the email again: all those thumbnails, no subject, and no body.

THE FINEST HUMAN ACHIEVEMENTS OF CIVILIZATION





# THE PAUL HACKETT AWARD FOR CREATIVE NONFICTION

## ARDEN XVIII

*TIRED BY JACOB DEL TORO*

At the end of that first summer, I looked at my hands: dirty, callused, and black with grime. Whose hands were these? They weren't the hands I had known. I couldn't imagine a pencil being carefully cradled or the delicate pages of a book being flipped between these fingers. No, these hands weren't the same. Something had changed them, had molded them, had sculpted them with nicks and scrapes and burns and bruises. I looked at my hands with their scars with their calluses and their creases from their work...my work. Like the books that had been held in them, they told a story: the smashed finger proclaiming my brashness, the dark creases illustrating the countless tires that I had hefted and hurled and rolled. As I placed them under the sweet-cool water of the faucet, a pang of sweet regret mixed in with the relief. As the grit and grime were washed down the drain, I couldn't help but feel as though a part of me was too.

My hands are what I remember most. I don't know why. Something about the strangeness of them surprised me. The consistency of glancing down at the same hands over and over was broken that day I started working at my father's tire shop.

The shop itself wasn't impressive. It was a little rundown car wash converted into my middle aged father's version of the American Dream. Too bad his dream was going to be my summer purgatory. An entire summer filled to the brim with changing tires, fixing flats, and constantly standing around in the South Georgia summer sun. Unlike my friends' vacations, there were no cool-blue pools to sit by, only the grey-brown water of the dunk tank; there were no white sandy beaches to enjoy, just the blazing hot black asphalt. But before all this summer "fun" could begin, I had to get through with my first day.

While most sane people were pleasantly drowsing in their beds, my father and I were raising the bay doors and setting up shop at about 7:30am. I lugged out the cumbersome carts which haphazardly held all the air guns and torque sticks and  $\frac{3}{4}$  sockets and  $\frac{13}{16}$  sockets and  $\frac{7}{8}$  sockets and the flathead screwdrivers and the one Philips head screwdriver I'd probably lose all with their distinct purposes and uses that were at that time unknown to me. In fact, I really didn't want to find out; no, I dreaded having to find out what each and every one of those infernal gizmos and gadgets did. My dread wasn't just some adolescent indolence; the task felt at that time, an insult to me. An A-student and dangerously intelligent, I had made acquaintance with work before. Like a mad scientist, I avidly pursued my forte, obsessively diving into my school work taking every AP and honors class that I could. To me, it wasn't about the difficulty of the class or the work load that compelled me, it was the sense of responsibility I felt. I remember thinking to myself, I couldn't just waste a blessing of God, could I? This aversion to anything my "intelligent self" deemed unworthy of my skills made me resent anything and everything that even remotely resembled an uneducated task. And thus, tires seemed to me



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about as uncomplicated as they are round.

That morning, it wasn't long before my first customer pulled in. An old man got out of the timeworn red pick-up truck which looked older than me. One its tires looked as if it had finally had enough of running the same dirt roads for who knows how many years, and it seemed to share about as many wrinkles and cracks as the farmer. My dad with hundreds or maybe thousands of similar situations under his belt promptly began to tell me what to do: "It's an easy fix," he said to me, the gears in his head already beginning to turn their familiar patterns, "We're just gonna slap on a 225/65/15 that we got in the bay."

The job was simple. My first test, I supposed. After scouring the hundreds of seemingly identical tires for the small little raised numbers that would tell me if I had found the right one, I rolled out the used tire to my father. Like a Labrador that just brought back the red squeaky ball, I stood there patiently waiting for my father to take it from me, but he only looked at me and said, "Well don't keep him waiting son. Finish what you started."

I sheepishly glanced over at the customer and his truck and began my job. After jacking up the car, I got the gun and the 7/8 socket. Before I had even left the cart, I had already made my first mistake. Without even coming over, my dad corrected me telling me that it was probably a 13/16 bolt. I sighed. My hot air and confidence fled in one exhale. Deflated, I resumed with the correct socket and took the tire off the truck. I could tell this was going to be a bad day.

What came next was perhaps the most pitiful and pathetic tire man-ship I think my dad and the gentleman had ever seen or will see. My hands, unused to the intimidating machines and instruments, were clumsy and fumbled about. My movements, laced with hesitation and anxiety, were more detrimental than anything. I was useless. I didn't know anything.

Tire changing is by no means a difficult occupation. It requires no real education or training despite what the warning labels on the machine may state, yet with all of my smarts and wits, with all my pride and confidence, I was lost. I had failed. I was like a child lost in the park, and I gave up and cried for help hoping my dad would swoop in and save me like he always had. He didn't. I knew why. It wasn't out of spite or a desire to humiliate me or even his usual stubbornness; he wanted me to learn something: my work was my work, not his or the customer's or anyone else's.

After what seemed like an eternity of spinning and rotating and prying and rolling and balancing, I had finished. I slapped on the tire and tightened the bolts. The gentleman paid, thanked my father, and left. If he had even acknowledged me, I didn't notice.

The rest of my day followed that pattern. Car comes up. Tire comes off. Tire is fixed. Tire goes back on. Customer pays. Car drives away. After a few times of my



attempts and watching my dad work, I began to get better. The feeling of dread was slowly starting to be replaced with a sense of easiness; I was beginning to get the hang of this. That is, until my dad's cellphone rang.

One of the most profitable things in the tire business was a service call. As I would come to find out, it was also one of the reasons why my help was so needed at the shop that summer. As I climb into the old diesel service truck, that annoyingly familiar feeling of dread returned.

With the blazing sun not letting up, the truck came to a stop in a field of some kind. I don't really remember what kind. It could've been cotton or peanut. It didn't matter to me; what mattered was the ginormous green tractor towering above me. It awkwardly leaned to one side as if it were some wounded behemoth. Its tire, taller than me and my father, stood slack and deflated with a sliver of wire sticking out of its side. I stoically stared at it not sure what to do. I found my eyes falling on my dad. A weary gleam seemed to reflect back from his eyes. Resignation, his eyes seemed to say, and with a sigh, it was replaced with the familiar determination that I'd always known.

We both climbed out of the truck and into the searing sun. He methodically began his work. All I could do was bring him his tools: three bars, soap, a bottle jack, and the air hose attached to his truck. Besides that, I just watched as the gears in his head once again began to move. He worked like a machine. Unhesitant. Steady. Determined. As he plunged two bars into where the black rubber of the tire met the yellow metal of the rim, I couldn't help but notice his hands: dirty, callused, and black with grime. They were so much different than my own pampered white hands, so fragile when compared to his iron-like grasp on the bar. You could tell the years and years those hands have spent working as easily as you could read a book, and also the years and years that mine hadn't. Despite his age, the muscles of his arms continued to run like the wheels of a locomotive. He was tired not just from this one service call but the countless others that came before it. A part of me wondered, if he will ever stop working. It came natural to my father to work, to labor, to bear the burden of a task. It paralleled my own proclivity to learn and to understand. It wasn't long before he was finished. The tire fixed. The customer paid. Our truck left with me staring at my father.

The rest of the day went by with the memorability of a day of school, and soon the day was over. One less day in my purgatory. One more in my father's dream.

I look back to that first summer day, the day where I woke up to reality. My father was destined to work whether by genes or luck or divine destination. Seventeen years ago he started working in tires. A drop out of high school, he labored his life away at some tire shop ever since. He sweated day to day to day for seventeen years because he had to for me, and that for some reason was enough for him. I spent one

day in his shoes- one day to his thousands--- and realized something you can't learn without tasting the bitter-sweet truth. Maybe it was because of a glaring pride or youthful ignorance, but I hadn't known what life was going to be like. Sure, grades can get you into college. Looks can get you a wife. Charm can get you a job. Money can get you luxury. But nothing can bring you happiness without a little work. Even great men have devoted their lives to finding happiness pondering its intricacies and facets and ended up living out hopeless existences trying to understand it. To me, my father succeeded where they failed. If I learned anything from my father, it's that we're all destined to work our own lot with every breath we got until something grows out of our work.

Now, as I look at my hands knowing they have plenty of work to do, I feel that annoyingly familiar dread return and I relish it.



## ARDEN XVIII

ONE DOES NOT SIMPLY LOVE BY TONYA STREETER

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When I feel love, I am filled with constant warmth deep in my body.

I love my dog more than my niece.

Ginger—my little Chihuahua—runs to me shaking, scared, pointy ears back, tail tucked when my noisy niece bumbles around the house, banging pans my mom gives her or crying for food, so I pick Ginger up, close my bedroom door, kiss her head about twenty times before I place her on my bed, lifting the covers; she slides under, burrows deep—safe from the one year old—and I crawl under the covers, joining her in her haven—only I am allowed; no babies because Chihuahuas don't like children and neither do I, so we hide together, wishing for the days when there wasn't a baby around, wishing for my niece to go away, to not exist, and I think about how horrible that must sound to God, and I ask him to forgive me because I didn't mean it; my niece is cute, but she freaks me out, God.

*"Happiness is a warm puppy"*—Charles M. Schulz

This quote is undeniably true for me. If someone said "happiness is a warm baby," I would have to disagree. When I hold my niece, which is not often, I can't wait until someone takes her from me. When I hold my dog, or any dog, I will hold them until someone pries them from my arms or until the dog wants to be let go, whichever comes first. Of course, my sister and my mom don't understand. I can't blame them; they are both mothers.

Right now, Ginger is sleeping next to me on one of my freshly cleaned pillows—the dog fur is unavoidable. The sound of her snoring and the occasional jerk of her legs keep me calm; I want to hear her snores better, so I turn down my music all the way. Her presence fills me with joy—the same joy, I imagine, my sister gets from her daughter, and the very same joy I hope my mom feels when I'm around—the kind of joy that makes me feel warm inside because this being is mine and loves me and wants to be with me.

"Oh, you'll change your mind about her!"—Pretty much everyone

Maybe when she learns to read and I can share *The Hobbit* and other favorites with her, I might like her more. But the main thing I imagine when I think of her getting older is all the annoying things she's going to do—tantrums, destroying my books with markers, getting sick and contaminating me time and time again—and I can't make myself love her enough to not dread it.

I hear a knock on my door, and then someone comes in. I'm still staring at my computer, so I don't know who it is yet. "There's Gingly!" I hear in a forced high pitched voice. Fuck. It's brother in law. He walks in. "Mary wanted to see Gingly," he says as he walks closer. Bullshit; she can't even talk. He knows that Ginger doesn't have any desire to see Mary or him, but he still pushes in, kicking my clothes and various books out of his way. He puts Mary on my bed with her shoes on. On the inside, I'm screaming. God knows what kind of germs the bottoms of her shoes



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have touched. He holds Mary's tiny, cute, hands in the air to help her walk across my clean blankets towards Ginger. A low growl is coming from Ginger, and it gets louder the closer she comes. Brother in law leans forward, whacks my Ginger's nose, and yells "I'll kill you if you keep growling." What the fuck did this asshole just say? In my mind, I imagine myself punching him in the nose and ripping his mouth right off his face. But in real life, I glare at him until he gets the message and leaves, taking Mary with him; she opens and closes her hand in a clumsy wave as they leave, and I can't help but smile a little

When she smiles at me, I smile back. She has a cute smile and a cute face. Her little fingers and toes are adorable, but other than that, I have no feelings for her. If I had to choose, I would always choose Ginger with her soft brown and black fur and her tiny paws that smell like Fritos.

My dislike for my niece has heightened tensions between my family and me, especially between my brother in law, sister, and me. When they come over with my niece, I stay in my room with Ginger. Usually, they leave me alone, but after they go home my text alert sound goes off and there's a message from my sister saying "You don't have to be so rude" or "Why do you hate us so much?" I never reply. Instead, I scoop Ginger up and place her on my stomach where she stays until she hears food being poured into her bowl.

When my sister was still pregnant, my brother in law would boast about how they weren't going to be like all the liberal sissy parents who don't spank their kids, and my sister nodded, said, "Yep." They have kept their word. When Mary was five months old, my brother in law was holding her on our couch and Mary flailed her arms like babies do and softly whacked him in the face. He immediately spanked her bottom and yelled, "You don't hit daddy!" I was sitting at the dining room table across the room from him, eating chips, watching this transpire. Ginger was sleeping on my lap, and at the sound of the spank, she sat up and her ears shot up. I stared wide-eyed at him, open mouth with a chip sitting on my tongue. He looked back at me with a dumb look on his face. "What," he said. I shook my head, looked at my bag of chips, and continued to eat them. Next time he does that, I'm going to spank him, I think. I stroke Ginger's fur with my grease free hand to get her to relax again.

The spanking I remember most vividly was unjust. I was in 1st grade and the whole class was making models of Earth out of papiermache. I was working with a boy named Xavier who was not participating. Halfway through the project, Xavier decided to push me out of the way so he could put on a lone slice of glue-soaked newspaper. "Stop!" I shouted in a whiney 6 year old voice. He said, "Shut up. Imma get my big brother to beat you up." To which I replied, "Well, my Mom and Dad will beat you up." After that, he sat back down, doing nothing, and I went back to work. A few minutes later, the teacher called me over; Xavier was standing by her

pointing at me. When did he go over there? I thought while I walked over to the teacher. She didn't waste any time. "Did you threaten Xavier? Did you tell him that you would have him beat up?" I was shocked. I looked at Xavier who was standing slightly behind the teacher now, smirking. I pointed at him, shaking my head, "He said he was going to get his brother to beat me up first!" She didn't listen. Two minutes later, I was sitting in the principal's office, listening to his side of the conversation with my Mom. A minute after he hung up the phone with her, the principal was lifting me up from my stomach over his arm and spanking me repeatedly. I cried for an hour after my mom picked me up and took me home.

My dad got home late that night. I remember he still had on his postman hat when he came to my room. He said, "What's this I hear of you getting sent to the principal's office?" He didn't give me time to answer or explain before he grabbed me and spanked me until I was crying so hard I couldn't breathe. I walked into class the next day and Xavier was smiling. He said, "My big brother is still going to beat you up."

The adults didn't believe me or give me a chance to explain or to learn—in a non violent way—that violence, even in words, is wrong. They were so eager to punish me that they didn't even consider that there might be another way of doing it or that there might be more to the story than they knew. It made me feel unimportant and ridiculous; I don't want anyone feeling like that, especially Ginger or Mary.

June 26, 2015; same sex marriage is legal in all 50 states. My family is having dinner together. I know what's coming. It starts with my brother in law. "So, it looks like we're going to have to leave the United States." Go ahead, I think, I can't fucking wait. "Yeah," my sister agrees, "Soon, we'll have to. Christians ain't going to have a choice." She follows that with an obnoxious laugh like it's a joke. "I know one thing," brother in law says, stuffing his face with meatloaf, "if Mary or any of my children tell me they're gay, I'm going to beat it out of them." It takes everything I have not to take a spoon full of mashed potatoes and fling it at him. Instead, I get up, grab my plate, and head to my room; Ginger follows, her nails clicking against the hardwood floor. I've got to protect that child I think while I share my mashed potatoes with Ginger.

My sister isn't as willing to spank Mary as her husband, but she will. It is not so much as the spankings that I'm afraid will damage Mary, but the emotional abuse she is bound to face.

She's always been verbally judgmental. She pointed out all of my flaws when I was growing up, like my increasing chubbiness, my unibrow, and the blackheads that peppered my nose no matter what I did. She was, and still is, vicious.

I hoped that becoming a mother would change her. There is still time, but she is already telling her daughter to stop eating the food my mom gives her because if



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she doesn't she'll get fat. I'm sure Mary doesn't understand what she's saying yet, but she will.

Ginger was a stray who showed up in our backyard in October of 2012. When we would walk outside, she would start barking at us. I took it upon myself to befriend her. I started with cheese, taking a slice from the fridge and sitting in the middle of the yard, tossing a piece to her to get her to trust me. I did that every day. Two months later, she would run to me whenever I walked outside. I didn't even need to have food, but I always did. My vet and I determined that she had been abused at some point. She had had an owner because she was fixed; he could see the scar. "Nervousness is natural in Chihuahua's," he told me, "but yours seems to have had traumatic experiences because any sudden sounds and fast movements freak her out." I had noticed that too. Even though she trusted me more than anyone else, she would book it to the other side of the room if I got up from a chair too fast.

Now, she is much calmer. The only time she acts scared is when it's storming or when brother in law and sister come over.

This week, I noticed that as soon as she heard them leave, she went to my door wanting out. "Ginger, you don't want out. The baby is still here," I told her. She kept sitting at the door even though the baby was making noise in the living room. I got up and let her out, followed her because I was hungry. She walked to the living room cautious, as if she was scared that a big ugly man might jump out at her. My mom heard her clicking nails and said, "It's Gingly!" I stopped and watched in the middle of the kitchen as Ginger continued to walk towards the baby. When she got to her, she stayed still and let Mary pet her. She was rough at first, but mom said gently, "Be nice, Mary," and she was; she petted Ginger softer and laughed when Ginger started to wag her curled tail.

I'm sitting at the dinner table with the rest of my family—mom, dad, sister, brother in law, and Mary. Ginger is under the table, looking up at us. I look at sister and brother in law hoping to feel that strong, constant affection that I should feel. I don't feel it. I look at Mary; she looks at me. She stares for a while, looking into my soul, and I smile at her. And I think I feel—not deep—but growing affection for her, even though she is covered and germs and cries a lot. I keep my eyes on her and pretend to communicate to her telepathically: Don't worry, I'm going to make sure you don't turn out like them. I look back at my plate.

I pick off a piece of chicken skin that I have on my plate especially to feed Ginger, and I drop it for her. My heart feels like it will explode with the strong, constant affection I feel for her as she gobbles her chicken, smacking her lips.

I love my dog and my niece more than I love my sister and brother in law.







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